

Is Love Ever Unconditional?

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Every once in a while we hear it: “unconditional love.” God has it; we should practice it. But is love ever really unconditional? Or is this a nice phrase that sounds good but actually deceives?

Does God love unconditionally? Is unconditional love, in fact, psychologically possible? At base these questions are one, since our capacity to love is part of God’s image in us.

This question actually reaches to the heart of today’s moral and ethical confusion. We are adrift because we have forgotten who God is, and the deep nature of his love. Modern ideas of love focus on emotion rather than character; shifting feelings rather than considered commitment. We go astray ethically when we measure love by fallen, self-centered human notions and emotions, not by God’s character as revealed in Jesus Christ. Humanity will continue to drift unless it again grasps what God’s love is—what it requires and costs.

Everyone likes the idea of unconditional love. It must be the loftiest kind of love, something like the romantic cliché, “endless love.” But does the idea even make sense? Certainly not without at least some clarification. Consider three cases:

Human Examples

A mother is having a test of wills with her two-year-old. The young boy wants to continue playing with his toys, but it’s time for bath and bed. Mom has already given him a five-minute grace period, after his first howling protests. Now she insists he will do as she says. She is not being unloving; her firmness is an expression of her concern for his well-being. Of course, the child doesn’t see it that way. Or doesn’t care. He simply wants his own will. If he could speak his feelings, he would probably say, “If you really loved me, you’d let me do what I want!”

As adults, we have little problem identifying with Mom here. We understand a child’s immaturity. Mom really is expressing love. But is it *unconditional* love? Yes, in the sense that she will continue loving her son even if he disobeys (if she is a healthy mother). But no, in the sense that, in this as many other situations, love itself requires conditions.

A harder case: Dick and Jane have been married for almost twenty years. It's been a good marriage over all, with three healthy children. But problems have sprouted in the past couple of years. And recently Jane discovered that her husband has committed adultery.

Dick wants to continue the adulterous relationship. He also wants his wife to accept it, like an up-to-date, sensible person, and let the marriage continue. What does real love mean for Jane in this situation? If she really loves him *unconditionally*, won't she accept her husband on his terms, as an expression of her love? Or will genuine love here require Jane to say, in effect: "It's either me or her." Sometimes (maybe always), genuine love requires conditions.

God's Ultimate Love

So we come to the third, the ultimate case. The love of God, "greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell." Human love may fail, but surely God's love is unconditional, right? Wrong.

God created man and woman and put them in the Garden. Conditionality were there from the start: "You are free But you must not . . ." (Gen. 2:16-17 NIV). The same truth runs throughout Scripture. And the logic of it undergirds the whole meaning of Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection.

If God's love were unconditional, the cross would be unnecessary. God does not love unconditionally. He loved so much that he sent his Son. And he loves so much that he will not, cannot, forgive and accept us as his redeemed children except on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice. To do otherwise would betray the integrity of God's own character. Precisely for this reason, acceptance without cost or sacrifice would betray the essential nature of love itself.

The cross is the ultimate proof that true love is never unconditional.

The same truth underlies the interrelationships of the three Persons of the Trinity. Here we are dealing with ultimate reality. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love each other unreservedly and without limit, but not unconditionally. The condition of their mutual love is their mutual submission and self-giving. This is the profoundest, but most glorious and most hopeful, reality in the universe. In fact, it defines love.

True love is impossible without the potential for freely-given response. Therefore truly unconditional love is impossible. The reason for this is that love is all about personal relationships, about reciprocity. Genuine love is a relationship of mutuality between or among “sovereign” persons—“sovereign” in the sense that if love is compelled, it ceases to be love.

If God loved unconditionally, he would forgive and accept every person unconditionally (as many assume he does). No cross, either for Jesus or us. But then the Christian message would be logically incoherent and psychologically unsound. It would be as shallow as the love of a person who always accepts another’s behavior, no matter how offensive or destructive, without ever calling him or her to account. That’s called codependence.

Why doesn’t God simply accept people (sinners) on the basis of Jesus’ sacrifice, irrespective of their response? Again, the answer lies in the nature of love itself. Without repentance, faith, and discipleship, a woman or man is not morally and psychologically capable of experiencing God’s love in its redemptive and transforming power. Without such a response, what a person feels in relation to God is something less than God’s love. It may be relief, psychological peace, or even a (false) sense of security. But it is not God’s transforming love, and therefore not salvation. If thought to be salvation, it is actually deception.

God’s love is conditional, not because God is a tyrant but because God is love. If God loved unconditionally, he would be less than God. To those who say this is outmoded mythology, I would say it is moral and psychological necessity. It is grounded not merely in psychology, however, but in God’s character as demonstrated in his acts in history.

Many people, probably even many Christians, think God’s love is unconditional. Many have bought the sentiment of the old popular song, “He”: “Though it makes him sad to see the way we live, he’ll always say, ‘I forgive.’” This is fuzzy romanticism and cheap grace, not the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If Jesus’ cross was necessary, then so is ours. To rely on God’s “unconditional love” apart from Jesus Christ, and apart from personal faith and discipleship, is to trust in myth or mushy sentiment — whether we are “liberals,” “evangelicals,” “fundamentalists,” or something else. The Good News is that God’s love in Jesus Christ forgives, transforms, and empowers for

righteous, compassionate living. The essential conditions are two: Jesus' death on the cross (costly grace) and our exercise of self-committing trust (genuine faith).

Apart from God's grace we can do nothing to save ourselves. Our works can never save us (Titus 3:5). But this does not mean salvation is unconditional. Jesus shows us the true nature of love — and its breathtaking cost.

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