

God's Love

Better than Unconditional

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Your love, O LORD, reaches to the
 heavens,
 your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mighty
 mountains,
 your justice like the great deep.
O LORD, you preserve both man and
 beast.
 How priceless is your unfailing love!
Both high and low among men
 find refuge in the shadow of your
 wings.
They feast on the abundance of your
 house;
 you give them drink from your river
 of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
 in your light we see light.
Continue your love to those who
 know you,
 your righteousness to the upright in
 heart.

Psalm 36: 5–10

With these words, the psalmist David attempts to capture the wonder and power of God's love. It is something he wrote about frequently throughout his life. Yet, though he piles superlative upon superlative and pushes the limits of language, David seems to know that the love of God can never be adequately described in words. All he can do is invite others to come and taste for themselves.

Is it any different for us today? Is it any easier for us to talk about love—*any* kind of love—let alone the all-encompassing love of God? Certainly, God's love is something people are hungry to hear about. Yet in some ways, it's even harder for us to talk about it today, since most people now try to describe the most intimate, spiritual aspects of their lives in secular language. These words seem thin and pale and weak when they try to convey the richness and weight of a biblical truth. And nowhere is that more obvious than when it comes to God's love.

For example, have you ever had people tell you that God deals with his children with "unconditional love"? Most of the time, they are

looking for a way to express how generous and complete his love is. But before we adopt this description we should remember David and ask: Is this explanation of divine love the best we can do?

I'd like to propose that God's love is much different and better than unconditional. Unconditional love, as most of us understand it, begins and ends with sympathy and empathy, with blanket acceptance. It accepts you as you are with no expectations. You in turn can take it or leave it.

But think about what God's love for you is like. God does not calmly gaze on you in benign affirmation. God cares too much to be unconditional in his love.

Watchful, Caring Love

Imagine yourself as a parent, watching your child playing in a group with other children. Perhaps you are observing your child in a nursery or a classroom, or on the playground, or in a soccer game. You might accurately say that you have unconditional love for all the children in the group. That is to say, you have no

ill will towards any of them; you generally wish them well.

But when it comes to your own child, something more goes on. You take much more notice of your own child. Injury, danger, bullying or injustice arouses strong feelings of protection—because you love your child. If your child throws a tantrum or mistreats another child, you are again aroused to intervene—because you love. If your child thrives, you are filled with joy—again, because you love.

Of course, any of these reactions may be tainted by a parent's sin. Pride, fear of other's opinions, lust for success, superiority, ambition, or calloused self-absorption can warp parental love.

But imagine such reactions untainted by sin. Read Psalm 121, Hosea 11, Hosea 14, Isaiah 49, the life of Jesus. The Lord *watches* you. The Lord *cares*. What his children do and what happens to them *matter* to him. His watching, caring, and concern are intense. Complex. Specific. Personal. Unconditional love isn't nearly so good or compelling. In comparison it is detached, general, impersonal. God's love is much better than unconditional.

Active, Intrusive Love

God's love is active. He decided to love you when he could have justly condemned you. He's involved. He's merciful, not simply tolerant. He hates sin, yet pursues sinners by name. God is so committed to forgiving and changing you that he sent Jesus to die for you. He welcomes the poor in spirit with a shout and a feast. God is vastly patient and relentlessly persevering as he intrudes into your life.

God's love actively does you good. His love is full of blood, sweat, tears, and cries. He suffered for you. He fights for you, defending the afflicted. He fights *with* you, pursuing you in powerful tenderness so that he can change you. He's jealous, not detached. His sort of empathy and sympathy speaks out, with words of truth to set you free from sin and misery. He will discipline you as proof that he loves you. God himself comes to live in you, pouring out his Holy Spirit in your heart, so that you will know him. He puts out power and energy.

God's love has hate in it too: hatred for evil, whether done to you or by you. God's love demands that you respond to it: by believing,

trusting, obeying, giving thanks with a joyful heart, working out your salvation with fear, delighting in the Lord.

In the C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy and her siblings were frightened at first to learn that Aslan, the Christ figure, was not a tame lion. But though he was not tame, they were reassured that he *was* good. In the same way, the Lord's love for his children is no tame love, no relational strategy. It's not characterized by calm detachment or a determination not to impose his values on you. His love is good in a way that's vigorous and complex.

That's the love that is poured out on you as his child, and you are meant—in some fashion—to have this same kind of love for one another: "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us" (Eph. 5:2; cf. 4:32–5:2).

Such real love is hard to do. It is so different from "You're okay in my eyes. I accept you just because you're you, just as I accept everybody. I won't judge you or impose my values on you." Unconditional love feels safe, but the problem is that there is no power to it. When we ascribe unconditional love to God, we substitute a teddy bear for the king of the universe.

Love Has a Goal

What words will do to describe the love of God that is spectacularly accepting, yet opinionated, choosy, and intrusive?

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one has died for all, and therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Cor. 5:14)

What words will do to describe the love of God that takes me just as I am but makes me over? That accepts people, yet has a lifelong agenda for change? Does it work to apply the label "unconditional love" to what God does—and to what godly parents and leaders are supposed to do, speak, and model?

The term seems flabby and weak in the face of God's powerful, purposeful love. However, many people do use the phrase "unconditional love" with good intentions, attempting to capture four significant and interrelated truths.

Four “Unconditional” Truths

First, it's certainly true that “conditional love” is a bad thing. It is not love at all, but an expression of the routine hatred and self-centeredness of the human heart. It's better to call it “conditional and manipulative approval.” It plays capricious Lawgiver and Judge: “If you please me and jump through my hoops, I will smile favorably on you. If you displease me, I will either attack you or avoid you.” People use the term “unconditional” as shorthand to contrast with manipulation, demand, or judgmentalism. They use it to shine the light on a sinful form of human relationship and to say, “Real love isn't like this.”

Second, it's true that God's love is patient. He, and those who imitate him, forbear and endure with others in hope. God does not give up. Because God perseveres, his saints will persevere to the end and come through into glory. People use “unconditional” as shorthand for hanging in there through the process of change, rather than bailing out when the going gets rough. They use it to build hope over the long haul.