

Queries & Controversies

Q: *I hear people use the term “unconditional love” a lot, and I feel uncomfortable with the term. Is it a good way to describe God’s love and how people should treat each other?*

A: The writer of the question senses that something isn’t quite right with the way people talk about both divine love and the ideal interpersonal love. I also have felt uncomfortable with the term “unconditional love.” I rarely use the term because God’s love is so much different and better than unconditional. Unconditional love, by contemporary definition, starts and stops with sympathy and empathy, with blanket acceptance. It accepts you as you are, with no expectations. You can take it or leave it. But think about what God’s love for you is like. God does not benignly gaze on you in affirmation. God cares too much to be unconditional.

Imagine yourself as a parent watching your own child playing in a group of other children. Perhaps you are observing your child in a nursery or classroom, or on the playground, or in a soccer game. You might accurately say that you have unconditional love for all the children as a whole; you harbor no particular hostility to any of them; you generally wish them well. But towards your own child something more goes on. You notice your own child. Injury, threat of harm, bullying, or injustice arouse strong feelings of protection—because you love. If your child throws a tantrum or acts the bully to another, you are again aroused to intervene—because you love. If your child thrives, you are filled with joy—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 His children *matter*. Watching, caring and mattering 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.

God is active. He decided to love you when He could have justly condemned you. He’s involved. He’s merciful, not simply tolerant. He who abhors sin 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. God’s love is full of blood, sweat, tears, and cries. He suffered for you. He fights for you, defending the afflicted. He fights you. He pursues you in powerful tenderness so that He can change you. He’s jealous, not detached. His sort of empathy and sympathy speaks out: words of truth to set you free of sin and misery. He will discipline you as proof that He loves you. He, Himself, comes to live in you, pouring out His Holy Spirit in your heart, so you will know Him. He puts out power and energy. God’s love has hate in it: hate for evil, whether done to you or by you. God’s love demands that you respond: believe, trust, obey, give thanks with a joyful heart, work out your salvation with fear, delight in the Lord.

C. S. Lewis commented on the Lord in one of his children’s books, “Aslan is not a tame lion.” The Lord’s love for the apple of His eye is no tame love, no therapeutic technique.¹ That’s the love you know. You are meant—in some fashion—to have this same kind of love for one another: “Walk in love as

¹ Many Scripture passages portray this many-sided love of God: Luke 16, Matthew 18, Psalm 103, Exodus 34, I John 4, Romans 1-11, Isaiah 49, Isaiah 53.

Christ loved us" (Ephesians 4:32-5:2). Such real love is vigorous and complex. It is hard to do. It is so different from "You're okay in my eyes; I accept you just because you're you, like I accept everybody; I won't judge you or impose my values on you. The atmosphere of affirmation I create may elicit self-actualizing forces from within you." Unconditional love substitutes a teddy bear for the king of beasts. Teddies make you feel good and don't talk back.

Should God's vigorous caring be called unconditional love, a term whose meaning is shaped by the calm detachment of the professional psychotherapist, whose guiding value is not to impose values? What words will do to describe the love of God that is spectacularly accepting and yet opinionated, choosy, and intrusive?

The love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised (II Corinthians 5:14f).

What words will do to describe the love of God that is both a gift to the utterly godless and an expectation unto utter godliness? That takes me just as I am but makes me over? That accepts people with a lifelong agenda for change? Is it helpful to apply the label "unconditional love" to what God does and to what godly parents and godly counselors are in some way supposed to do, speak, and model?

I'm uncomfortable with the term. However, many people do use the phrase unconditional love with good intentions, attempting to capture four significant and interrelated truths.

First, "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 unconditional as shorthand to stand in contrast to 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, 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.

Third, true love is God's gift. It is at God's initiative

and choice rather than conditioned by my performance. God's gospel love is not wages; it is a gift. It is a gift that I cannot earn; more than that, it is a gift that I do not even deserve. God loves weak, ungodly, sinful enemies. The gift is contrary to my due. He ought to kill me on the spot. "Not what my hands have done" can bring me into the love of God. People use unconditional as shorthand for such unearned blessing. They use it to overcome legalism.

Fourth, God receives you just as you are: sinful, suffering, confused. In street talk, "He meets you where you are." Don't clean up your act and then come to God. Come. People use unconditional as shorthand for God's invitation to rough, dirty, broken people. They use it to overcome despair and fear that would shrink back from asking help from God and God's people.

These are precious truths. The adjective unconditional actually has a noble theological lineage in describing this freely initiated and persevering grace of God. Should I, then, be comfortable with the way most people use the term? Does the current shorthand carry this practical theological freight? Is it a satisfactory equivalent for these four wonderful truths? I don't think so. The term muddies the waters for four reasons.

First, there are more biblical and vivid ways to capture each of the four truths just stated.

- The opposite of manipulation is not dispassionate benignity. Real love's kindness has zeal, self-sacrifice, and a call to change woven in (Isaiah 49:15f; I Thessalonians 2:7-12);

- The call for you to hang in there through the thick and thin of a person's struggles can be frankly stated: "Love is patient," "Be patient with them all" (I Corinthians 13:4; I Thessalonians 5:14);

- "Grace" and "gift" capture the free, unearned quality of God's love less ambiguously than unconditional (II Corinthians 9:15; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:4-10);

- God's welcome to the godless and stained comes with a story attached: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (I Timothy 1:15). "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2). The gospel is an action story, not an attitude of acceptance.

People currently employ a somewhat vague, abstract word—unconditional—when the Bible gives us more vivid and specific words, metaphors, and stories.

Second, it is clear that unmerited grace is not strictly unconditional. While God's love does not depend upon what you do, it very much depends on what Jesus Christ did for you. In that sense, it is highly conditional. It cost Jesus His life.

In fact, the love of God defined in the Bible contains the fulfillment of two conditions: perfect obedience and

a sin-bearing substitute. Jesus, by His active obedience to the will of God, demonstrated and earned the verdict "Righteous." His consistent obedience to God's conditions is reckoned to you by free grace when God justifies the ungodly. And Jesus, in His passive obedience, suffered the penalty of bloody death. The substitutionary Lamb took the death penalty as a condition of your freedom and life. So the love of God contains two "conditions fulfilled" as it is handed freely to you and to me. God's love contains the life and death work of the one who was both God's Servant and God's Lamb. Unconditional love? No, something much better. People who now use the word unconditional often communicate an acceptance neutered of this detailed, Christ-specific truth.

Third, God's grace is something more than unconditional in another way. It is intended to change the people who receive it. There *is* something wrong with you. From God's point of view, you not only need someone else killed in your place in order to be forgiven; you need to be transformed in order to be fit to live with. The word unconditional may be an acceptable way to express the welcome of God. But it fails to communicate the point of that welcome: a comprehensive and lifelong rehab, learning "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." People often use the word to communicate an affirmation that "You're okay," robbing God's love, and a counselor's or parent's love, of its very purpose. You "turn" to receive God's love; you do nothing to receive blanket acceptance.

Fourth, and most serious, unconditional love carries a load of cultural baggage. As you've read the previous paragraphs, you've noticed how unconditional is wedded to words such as "tolerance, acceptance, affirmation, benign, okay." It is wedded to a philosophy that says love should impose no values, expectations, or beliefs on another. I could have used the technical phrase that arose within humanistic psychology: "unconditional positive regard." Most people think of this concept when they think of unconditional love: "Deep down you're okay; God accepts you just as you are. God smiles on you even if you don't jump through any hoops. You have intrinsic worth. God accepts you, warts and all. You can relax, bask in His smile, and let the basically good, real you emerge." This is a philosophy of life, a practical theology, utterly at odds with God's real love.

The opposite of conditional and judgmental might seem to be unconditional and affirming. The opposite of high, capricious expectations might seem to be no expectations. The opposite of being bossy might seem to be non-directive. Or so people wish. Conditional love is obviously hate, not love. Unconditional love—used with

the meaning the term now carries—is a more subtle deceit. Readers who want to dig further into this issue might profitably read "The Case of Herbert Bryant" by Carl Rogers.² This landmark counseling case—a 180-page verbatim transcript with running commentary—shows how Rogers's unconditionality and nondirective method actually works. A licentious young man with a morbid conscience becomes a self-satisfied, more civilized sinner. Rogers's unconditional love actually masks a powerful and insidious agenda: create happy, civilized people anesthetized to God. Covertly, Rogers is utterly directive.

I'm uneasy with the term unconditional love because it so frequently sidesteps reality. It keeps company with teachings that say to people, "Peace, peace," when, from God's holy point of view, there is no peace (Jeremiah 23:14,16f). If you receive blanket acceptance, you need no repentance. You just accept it. It fills you without humbling you. It relaxes you without upsetting you about yourself—or thrilling you about Christ. It lets you bask without reckoning with the anguish of Jesus in the garden and on the cross. It is easy and undemanding. It does not insist on or work at changing you. It deceives you about both God and yourself. Most people speak of and aspire to unconditional love containing a large dose of this cultural baggage.

We can do better. Saying "God's love is unconditional love" is a bit like saying "The sun's light at high noon is a flashlight in a blackout." Come again? A dim bulb sustains certain analogies to the sun. Unconditional love does sustain certain analogies to God's love. But why not start with the blazing sun rather than the flashlight? When you look closely, God's love is very different from "unconditional positive regard," the seedbed of contemporary notions of unconditional love. God does not accept me just as I am; He loves me despite how I am; He loves me just as Jesus is; He loves me enough to devote my life to renewing me in the image of Jesus. This love is much, much, much better than unconditional! Perhaps we could call it "contraconditional" love. Contrary to the conditions for knowing God's blessing, He has blessed me because His Son fulfilled the conditions. Contrary to my due, He loves me. And now I can begin to change, not to earn love but because of love.

People who speak of unconditional love often mean well. A few use the words with the old theological meanings intact. Many want people to care for each other. Many want to help those who view God as the great critic, whom they either serve drudgingly or flee

²Carl Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1942), pages 261-437.

because they can never please Him. And I have no doubt that the phrase has served some strugglers usefully, despite the riches it leaves out and the baggage it usually contains. But there are good reasons why the Bible tells us stories of amazing events, speaks in gripping metaphors, and unfolds detailed theology in order to inform us of God's love. You need something better than un-

conditional love. You need the crown of thorns. You need the touch of life to the dead son of the widow of Nain. You need the promise to the repentant thief. You need to know, "I will never leave you or forsake you." You need forgiveness. You need a Vinedresser, a Shepherd, a Father, a Savior. You need to become like the one who loves you. You need the better love of Jesus.

— *David Powlison*