

Understanding the Love of God

by Denver Cheddie

God's love is one of the most important aspects of Christianity. A proper understanding of the *agape* love of God is crucial to a balanced Christian life. Some Christians underestimate God's love. This is evident whenever they worry about losing their salvation or about being punished by God. This is because they don't understand the extent of God's love that he demonstrated in Christ on Calvary. Catholics underestimate God's love, and this is why they pray for their dead loved ones supposedly in purgatory. If they understood Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, they would never believe in purgatory.

On the other hand, it is possible to overestimate God's love. Have you ever heard someone ask, "How could a loving God send people to an eternal hell?" or "how could God create someone gay then judge them for it?" These people totally misunderstand what God's love is all about. God's love is not the same thing as acceptance. God loves everyone but he does not accept everyone. God's love is unconditional, but his acceptance is very much conditional.

God's love for us

There is a tendency among Christians nowadays to refer to God as "Daddy". Now I am not saying that is wrong. The Bible does refer to God as our Father. But the modern western concept of "daddy" is different from the Biblical concept of "father". When Absalom wanted to see his father, David (the king), he bowed to the ground when he approached David's throne (2 Samuel 14:33). He did not run and jump on his daddy's lap. So when we refer to God as "daddy", I wonder if we are trivializing the reverence that we are supposed to have to God, and making that

relationship way more cuddly and cozy than it was meant to be. The bible presents God as a loving heavenly father, but not as a doting daddy who would spoil us with stuff even though we are ungrateful brats.

The Bible is very clear on the extent of God's love. Romans 5:6-8 tells us that God demonstrated his love, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. That is how God demonstrated his love. So when people ask "how could a loving God send people to an eternal hell?", they are mixing up love and acceptance. God's love was extended to that individual long in advance – by dying for them and providing unmerited salvation free of charge. But if that person rejects God's unconditional love, they are gambling their eternal future on God's conditional acceptance. Christianity is not about acceptance. It is about God's love. But if that love is rejected, acceptance does not apply.

The English word love is very broad. It can encompass anything from love of ice cream to love for a member of the opposite sex you barely even know to love for your children. The Greek word *agape* however is very narrow.

The bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). Love is not something that God has, but something He is. It goes on to say that this love was shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). *Agape* is a quality of a person, such that he/she cannot help but love. Like on the other hand is dependent on the object of one's affection. You like someone because that person has qualities that you find appealing. You love someone because love is in your heart. That's why Christians are commanded to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44) – it has absolutely nothing to do with them or the qualities they possess.

Our love for God

How do we demonstrate love for God? The bible says that if you love God, keep his commandments (John 14:15). If you hate your brother whom you see, how could you say you love God who you cannot see? (1 John 4:20). The terms of God's love are so clear. Love for God is not demonstrated by long tears during praise and worship whenever you feel overwhelmed by emotion. That has its place, but some of the biggest hypocrites in church cry longer tears than anyone when they pray. God's love is supposed to transform that way we live. If you claim to love God, then your lifestyle is supposed to reflect that. You are supposed to want your life to please God and to overcome sin.

Our love for others

If God's love is in your heart, then you are supposed to love others the way God does. God demonstrated his love by dying for their sins. And just as Christ presented himself as a dying sacrifice, Romans 12:1,2 requires us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Our lives are supposed to be self-sacrificing service to others. That's what *agape* means. Of course that does not mean we are to be walkovers. Our focus should be on living our lives so that others see Christ in us, and so that they may benefit SPIRITUALLY. The bible did warn us about casting our pearls before swine. We must know the difference between those who want to be helped spiritually, and those who just want to take advantage of us.

One of the best human examples of self-sacrificing love is the love some parents have for their children. Interestingly you don't see that same unconditional love being demonstrated between husbands and wives. In

the US, over 50% of marriages end in divorce. This statistic clearly indicates that the love being demonstrated by most husbands and wives is not unconditional. But when last have you heard of a parent divorcing their children? It does not happen. Yes there are bad parents who abuse and neglect their kids. But that's not what I am talking about. I am referring to single parents who divorced their spouses because of "irreconcilable differences", but would sacrifice everything including their own happiness for their kids. It is amazing to me that these people hate their ex-spouses because of the unhappiness they caused, but if you really look at it, their kids cause them so much more trouble yet they love them unconditionally. Yes they should sacrifice for their kids, but if they had loved their husbands/wives the same way, they would not have got divorced.

Conclusion

This is just a small example of the love that God has for us. God sacrificed his only begotten Son so that we could have eternal life. We never deserved it, yet God did it for us. Then you would think that God expects us to love him in return. But God knows that we were not even capable of that, so He shed his love abroad in our hearts. Thus He enabled us to love the same way that He does. This love is not just supposed to fill us with emotion, but is supposed to be our motivation for serving God and loving others. This is why we can forgive our enemies and sacrifice ourselves for others. I pray that we will not take for granted God's great love for us. Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we can be called the children of God (1 John 3:1).

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