

God's Love is Conditional



These days it seems every month I hear a priest in a homily or a fellow Catholic in conversation say, “God’s love is *unconditional*.” So I am well aware that a prefix appears to be missing in the title of my essay. It is absent not because I have not been listening, nor because I am that clueless for not understanding what is meant. Of course I believe that God’s love for us transcends any reason or justification we can give or earn for it. Still my essay’s title is intended to be provocative because this ubiquitous phrase deserves some reflection. I want to give the claim, and its opposite, some critical theological analysis, because perhaps a phrase so commonly repeated is one that goes unquestioned. Are our mouths repeating what our minds have never measured?

Even if its primary meaning is true, which I grant, it does not necessarily follow that the statement is without ambiguity, or that it is the best way to summarize the Christian Gospel and express the greatness of God’s love for us. Given our contemporary culture’s bleached out version of the Christian view of God, to say over and over again to believers that “God’s love is unconditional” may be greatly unsuitable to what they need to hear. As an abstract summarization of a historical revelation that more and more Catholics know less and less about, the phrase can all too easily suggest there are no costs or demands for following Christ. But more than just drawing out the detrimental implications of the phrase, I would like to show instead that saying “God’s love is conditional” (i.e. without the prefix) is in many respects more faithful to the Gospel and pastorally fitting for our times.

Let me begin, however, with what is right and true about the theological claim that “God’s love is unconditional,” first in terms of what is usually meant by those who employ it, and second how it is more theologically profound and meaningful than that generally intended. This phrase is repeated so frequently today because it expresses in a straightforward manner the abiding and faithful love God has for us, which never

depends upon nor waivers because of what we do or fail to do. God *is* love (1 John 4:8) and God is always loving toward us; nothing can change this. Biblical passages that convey this ultimate truth about God include Hosea 11:8-9 and Isaiah 49:14-16:

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."
 Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no
 compassion on the son of her womb?
 Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
 Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands....

And then there's Romans 8:35, 37-39:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or
 distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...
 For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor
 things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor
 anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of
 God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹

Faith's basis for this humbling claim in God's inalienable love for us is Jesus Christ and his all-conquering love, shown in his willingness to suffer grievously and die for us sinners. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8; cf. Eph 2:4-7). That God's prodigal love is constant and unalterable is such good news because too many times in our lives we prove to be unworthy of God's love. In the history of the people of Israel the prophets and psalmists appealed to God's steadfast love, his *hesed*, as all they had left of hope in divine favor after having been repeatedly unfaithful to the God who had delivered them from slavery and made them his people. God in his steadfast love remained faithful to his people because he remained true to the greatness and glory of his name (Psalm 79:9; Ezekiel 36:22-23; Daniel 3:11-12). God acts as God towards us in accordance with the inaccessible greatness of his Being and the unfathomable depths of his Love. His love is *for* us but not *in accordance with* our deserts, our lovableness.

Thus "God's love is unconditional" is a modern form of 1 John 4:8b: "God is love." It is a shorthand expression that summarizes the gist of the Christian revelation and articulates the greatest theological truth. The statement is a reminder of what we have been told and should never forget, and it is offered as a word of encouragement, that what matters most is not how we have acted before God but how God regards us.

¹ All biblical citations are taken from the Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 1977).

If we are convinced that God's love cannot fail, lessen, waiver, or end then we always have the best of reasons to try again and persevere in our relationship with God. We can also have hope that God's mercy is available to all; it simply is not possible for any person to cause God not to love him or her.

In the way that it is used the phrase's meaning is more economic than strictly theological—that is, primarily signifying God's salvific regard for us than the immanent nature of God as God is. Yet "God's love is unconditional" can be taken to express something true about the eternal nature of God, even though the majority of those who say it do not mean it in that way. God's love is unconditional because God is unconditional—that is, nothing conditions him, not just his love but also his existence, life, knowledge, and goodness as well. For example, just as God's love is not elicited from him when we perform some worthy deed, God's knowledge of us is not acquired from his observing what we do. God's knowledge is the creative cause of created reality, not the effect of created reality. Similarly, God's goodness is not dependent upon nor increased by the good he does for us; his goodness simply is, absolutely infinite and perfect without condition, beyond decrease or increase.

Thus, even though it is rarely meant this way, "God's love is unconditional" can be understood as contrasting not just divine love from human love, but divine nature from all created reality. Everything that we know and experience in this world exists as conditioned, but God transcends any such limiting factors. Indeed, to be in this world is to be conditioned in so many ways, at the very least by space and time, but also in terms of various needs and relations of dependence, beginning with that first dependence of needing extrinsic causes to bring about one's created existence. No such needs, dependencies or preconditions apply to God, who relates to all things as their Creator, the unconditioned ground of all that comes to be. God does not even exist under eternity as creatures do in time, nor in heaven as we do on earth; rather God is his eternity (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 2), and God is heaven, since heaven is the unrestricted manifestation of his glory.

It is ironic that in a culture so metaphysically averse, a phrase so metaphysical in its wording and implications is so popular.

While both economically and theologically true, this statement, however, is not without problems. In the first place, the frequent repetition of this phrase is part and parcel of a contemporary trend in theology and preaching to speak of the love and mercy of God without also affirming that after death there is a divine judgment. God who is love and mercy is also the One to whom we must give an account of what we have done in our lives (Matt 25:19; Rom 14:12; Heb 4:13, 13:17; 1 Pet 4:5). These are not contradictory theological truths—as evidenced by the fact that Jesus Christ who reveals and communicates the height, depth and breadth of divine compassion by his suffering and death is also the Son of Man to whom God the Father hands over all judgment (John 5:22-23, 37, 40; Mt 25:31; Acts 10:42, 17:31; 2 Tim 4:1; cf. Dan 7:10). Indeed the

crucifixion of Jesus Christ is simultaneously the communication of divine mercy and the divine judgment of human sinfulness. The Scriptures, both old and new, are wholly consistent in a double affirmation that God is both Savior and Judge of his people, for his sovereignty applies to both (e.g. Amos 1-2; Joel 3:1-3; Zeph 1). There is no contradiction between both truths, for as St. John of the Cross poetically expressed it, "In the evening of our life, we will be judged by love."²

While admittedly it is a theological challenge to explain how divine mercy and divine justice are not only compatible but one and the same in God, still the problem is not the difficulty of explicating this mystery but the distorted portrayal of God's relation to us that emerges from rarely, if ever, teaching that the God who saves by his mercy still judges, and judges those who have been given more by the most exacting standard of all (Luke 12:48). If God's love is simply and exclusively presented as unconditional, then it would seem that he could never judge us negatively, since any judgment based upon what we have done or failed to do would be overwhelmed by the truth that God loves us unconditionally anyway. In a culture that has lost the sense of sin, which all too readily embraces victimhood and shirks personal responsibility for one's shortcomings, this repeated emphasis upon the unconditionality of divine love without little mention of divine judgment after death is spiritually unbalanced and pastorally dangerous. The poorly catechized hearer of "God's love is unconditional" can easily convert it to mean "God loves me as I am" and then deduce that little or no repentance, conversion, and self-denial is expected of a follower of Jesus Christ. In other words, an unbalanced emphasis upon the unconditional character of God's love can lead to an easy self-justification for remaining spiritually immature or lukewarm. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us, while the love and grace of God is plentiful and liberally given, it is never cheap.

Given this distortion it can be striking that the Gospels not only never state that God's love is unconditional, but on the contrary Jesus frequently teaches that salvation is conditional upon our response and actions. To take but one example from each of the four Gospels:

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21).

"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:15).

"I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5).

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31).

² "En la tarde de nuestra vida, seremos juzgados por el amor." John of the Cross, *Palabras de luz y de amor*, n. 57.

The Jesus who heals the leper, forgives the sinful woman, and welcomes children begins his public ministry with the call to repent (Mark 1:15), teaches that his followers must take up the cross (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), and commands that they love one another as he has loved them (John 13:34, 15:12). In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus stipulates three ways a disciple can be “unworthy” of him (Matt 10:37-38), while in Luke’s account there are three conditions that if not met means one “cannot be” his disciple (Luke 14:26-27, 33). The last instance deserves to be quoted because it quite clearly indicates the demands of discipleship: “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

One may make the rebuttal that all the above examples refer to the conditions on the human side of our relationship to God, not the divine side, and therefore do not call into question the unconditional nature of God’s love for us. Of course discipleship is conditional because it involves the free will of the disciple, who as a fallen human being cannot be very reliable. But God is unfailing, and so the truth of the phrase in question must remain: *God’s* love is unconditional because God is always unchanging, wholly trustworthy and ever resolute in his mercy towards us. However, without granting the implication that the unconditionality of God’s love means the conditionality of our response is insignificant, it should be pointed out that there is one instance where Jesus quite clearly teaches that God his Father will treat us conditionally. This condition is not in regards to a minor matter; nothing less than one’s whole relationship to God is at stake. Indeed, this condition is so central that Jesus wanted his followers to be reminded of it every day, for he includes it in the prayer he taught his disciples, the “Our Father”: “And forgive us our debts, *as* we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). After finishing the prayer Jesus immediately stresses how conditional this “*as*” is: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15). The conditional nature of being forgiven is implicit in the fifth beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt 5:7; Luke 6:36), and is related to Jesus forbidding his disciples to judge others: “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt 7:1-2; Luke 6:37-38; cf. John 7:24, 8:7; 1 Cor 4:5). Jesus could not have said this more plainly: receiving God’s forgiveness is *conditional*, contingent on whether we forgive, show mercy, and withhold judgment.

More than all this, however—that is, more than the phrase’s ambiguity and questionable compatibility with the fullness of Gospel teaching—I would like to close with the argument that proclaiming “God’s love is conditional” is actually a better summary of the Christian faith. By this I do not intend to contradict what is true of the unconditional nature of God’s love by arguing that God’s love and kindness is dependent upon our merits or lost when we sin. What I mean is that as Christians who believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, our faith rests upon the incredible truth

that God's love has become conditional in Jesus Christ. The Word who is *homoousios* with the Father has become *homoousios* with all of us, and in sharing our human nature this Holy One of God has shared our very conditions. It is striking how frequently and consistently Jesus emphasizes the conditional character of his presence and saving action. Many times he works a miracle by the instrumentality of his body: stretching out his hand to touch the leper (Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13), putting his finger in the deaf-mute's ear and then wetting it with his spittle before touching the man's tongue (Mark 7:33), or touching the funeral bier of the only son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:14). The one whose words can still the wind and the waves nonetheless uses the power of touch so often that the people exclaim, "What mighty works are wrought by his hands!" (Mark 6:2). Even when he heals at a distance, such as the possessed daughter of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28), he still does so through his human will. My point is that all these salvific actions are wrought by divine power that has become conditioned in a man anointed with the Holy Spirit. The wonder produced is not just on account of the miraculous effect, but that it is a man who performs them, a man who can be met and encountered only if certain conditions have been met, the least of them being that one must be where he is when he is there. Jesus emphasizes the conditional nature of his presence when he tells his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24). This is not the unconditional God, whom one can encounter in every place and at any moment (Psalm 139:7-12), but God so radically conditioned that only a very select set of *eyes* and *ears* were blessed to sense him.

The conditionality of God's love is perfected in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, who learned obedience from what he suffered (Heb 5:8). Our faith emphasizes the very historicity of his crucifixion when we confess the name of the governor who sentenced him to death, and if the resurrection was not an actual event then our faith is entirely worthless (1 Cor 15:14). In the Gospel of John the evangelist takes the trouble to emphasize that the spear's piercing of Jesus' side is testified by an eyewitness (19:34-35), and that the nail marks and pierced side of the Risen One were probed by the finger of the apostle Thomas (20:27). As he had done in many of his miracles, Jesus communicated the Holy Spirit to his apostles by including the action of his body: he breathed on them (John 20:22). What we believe, what we celebrate, what we place our hope in as Christians, are divine mysteries that have become conditional, temporal, sensible, historical, earthly, human.

This conditionality, however, does not end when Jesus ascends, but continues in the mystery of the Church, when water pours down a forehead, chrism is applied to the skin, and the Body and Blood of Christ held by hands and consumed by mouths. What a life-changing difference there occurs when a man has the hands of a bishop laid over his head, or when a man and a woman speak their vows and exchange rings. The

healing hands of Christ continue to touch the infirm in the sacramental anointing of the sick, and every penitent in confession hears firsthand what Jesus told the paralytic: "Your sins are forgiven." Nor is this conditionality limited to the seven sacraments, since someone's evangelization begins when a believer's words or actions speak of Christ, and another may turn away because a Christian betrayed the faith. Even being silent when a word of encouragement or correction is called for can have everlasting consequences. Our faith does not permit us to simply wish another's good fortune, for faith without works that meet actual spiritual and bodily needs is dead (James 2:14-17), and our eternal destiny follows accordingly (Matt 25:31-46). Anointed with the same Spirit that Christ received, we too are called to be the conditions when divine mysteries of the eternal Unconditioned are made a present and living reality in our time. In Christ and as members of his body, we are the conditional love of God in the world.

To proclaim that God's love is conditional is a more biblical and more faithful summary statement of the Christian Gospel, expressing the dynamic of the Incarnation at the heart of Christology, the nature of the sacraments as privileged moments when divine love and grace touch our lives, and the ecclesial call to make Christ present and active in the here and now by our concrete works of faith and charity. That God's love is unconditional is true, but it does not capture the more radical truth that it has become conditional in the man Jesus, most especially in his suffering, death and resurrection. To speak of the unconditional nature of God's love can obfuscate the call —indeed, the command—of Christians to act as fully and authentically human as Jesus did. To proclaim instead that God's love is conditional is to profess that it can be received and experienced today in this place, if only we allow the Spirit of God's love poured into our hearts to flow out to our neighbors through our voices that witness, our hands that help, our knees that bend, and our lives that are pleasing to the Father. We must do more than repeat an abstract, if comforting, truth. We must act and become the concrete conditions of God's love, here, now. If we do not become these conditions, then the opportunity for many to know the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ will be lost forever.

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