

God's Unconditional Love

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The message of God's unconditional love is being espoused from an increasing number of pulpits in Christian churches. There is so much at stake, this declaration deserves scrutiny so its validity can be ascertained. The two criteria that will be evaluated are whether belief in God's unconditional love is logical and rooted in the Bible.

Belief in God's unconditional love is illogical, without further qualification. The verse most commonly referenced demonstrating that God has unconditional love is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life". However, this sentence implicitly is an "If, then" qualified sentence; if you believe, then you will be saved. The verse nowhere says that God loved the world unconditionally. Rather, it says God loved the world so much He sent His Son to die for all so that anyone who would believe in Jesus could live. According to John 3:16, unbelievers stand in the position of being doomed to perish; they must move from that position in order to live. The default of doom is difficult to reconcile with unconditional love.

The Bible contradicts any plain meaning of the idea of unconditional love in a temporal sense in the Old Testament books teaching about Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and subsequent exile of the Jews to Babylon. Isa 50:1 teaches of Israel's sin against God in which, "The Lord asked, 'Where is the certificate of your mother's divorce, whom I have put away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you into slavery? Behold, you have sold yourselves because of your sins. Because of your transgressions, your mother is put away.'" Consistently, the Lord says in Jer 3:8, "I saw that despite the certificate of divorce I gave Israel and putting backsliding Israel away for committing adultery that her treacherous sister Judah did not fear but went and played the harlot, also." The utter ruin of the Jews was foretold by the Lord in Jer 16:6, "...for I have taken away my blessings from this people and even my love and mercy." Similarly, Hosea 1:6 teaches, "...I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel, but I will utterly take them away." In Jer 6:19, the Lord says, "I will bring evil upon this people, which is the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not listened to my words, nor to my law, but rejected it." And in Jer 7:34, God declared, "I will cause to cease from the streets of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of happiness and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, because the land will be desolate." Ez 5:11-13 describes how God would bring anger and wrath, "A third part of you will die from plague or famine, and a third part will fall by the sword, and I will scatter a third part into all the winds and I will draw out a sword after them."

Similarly, the Bible contradicts any plain meaning of the idea of unconditional love in the eternal sense in John 15:6 recording Jesus saying, "If any man does not abide in me, he is like a branch thrown away, that withers, and men gather these branches and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

If God has unconditional love only to believers then this has qualified His love. This is equivalent to saying God's unconditional love has one condition. In fact, this is the truth of the matter. Through His mercy and grace, God has unconditional love for those who are alive in Jesus Christ. Subjective justification appropriates the promise of the Gospel for believers through faith which is a gift of God. Rom 10:9-10 details how

salvation is grasped, “If you will confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with the heart that man believes and is considered righteous, and it is with the mouth that confession is made so he is saved”. Further, there are no conditions on the quality or quantify of sins that God forgives penitents. Apostle John taught Christians in the nascent Church according to 1Jn 1:8-10, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”

The idea known as objective justification is practically defined by 1Jn 2:2, “Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” If proponents of God’s unconditional love believe objective justification is an equivalence, then for clarity, the latter phrase should be used instead since it is well understood. However, if proponents extend their idea to think that God bestows unconditional love to both believers and unbelievers with universal salvation due to universal atonement, then this is the ancient heresy of universalism. Universalism maintains that everyone will go to heaven and that no one will go to hell. This heretical thought is certainly consistent with the *prima facie* idea of unconditional love since it would be inconceivable for a beneficiary of unconditional love to be subjected to torment or cast into hell. However, the Bible disputes universalism. In fact, no one talked as much about hell or described it as clearly as Jesus.

To summarize why belief in God’s unconditional love as a standalone phrase is illogical, there are no Bible verses of this concise idea. Verses that proponents rely on actually are qualified or conditional. Further, there is contradiction between the idea of unconditional love and Biblical descriptions of the wrath of God, delivered either temporally or eternally, which requires qualification. If God’s unconditional love applies only to believers, then there is that one condition. It is an obfuscation to equate God’s unconditional love with objective justification. Finally, without qualification and delimitation, unbelievers could easily equate unconditional love with salvation for everyone, which is a heresy.

Belief in God’s unconditional love is unbiblical, unless there is further qualification. This phrase does not exist in the Bible nor does its meaning. The only way to discover unconditional love in Bible verses is by eisegesis, which is the erroneous interpretation of verses by the forceful insertion of meaning into them. As we read before, John writes in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”. An eisegetical reading maintains that God’s love must be unconditional since He sent Jesus to die for the whole world. But this interpretation is simplistic, erroneous, and does scant justice to John 3:16, which is arguably the most concise summary in the Bible of God’s redemptive plan. Paul amplifies on the first part of John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son”) in Rom 5:8, “God commends His love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Similarly, John writes in 1Jn 4:19, “We love Him because He first loved us.” These verses acknowledge that Jesus was not waiting for us to achieve perfection, which he knew was impossible, before he offered himself up for us on the cross. Paul explains in Rom 6:23 why Jesus had to die in order that we might live, “For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life

through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Jesus has given everyone a gift by his death on the cross, paying the price for our sins. But the gift that Jesus offers isn’t forced on anyone. Rather, everyone must accept it personally. Those who do not believe in Jesus remain debtors and, at judgment day, must themselves pay the price of death for their sins. The last part of John 3:16 (“...whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”) was addressed by Jesus after his resurrection in Mark 16:16, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved. But he who does not believe will be damned.” Finally, the verse begs the question, “Why Jesus? What does he have to do with this?” Jesus is the only man who lived a perfect, sinless, blameless life. Since he is not guilty of sin, he has no punishment due. As a result, he is a perfect offering to God for the sins of others. So that we do not have to pay the penalty for our sins, God devised this substitutionary atonement. Paul explains in 2Cor 5:21, “For God has made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Further, in Eph 5:1, “Be followers of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also has loved us and has given himself for us as a sweet smelling fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.” Since unconditional love is a phrase unrecognized by the Bible and this is the most common verse used to pronounce the doctrine, this short rebuttal will have to suffice.

The Bible has a plethora of verses, stories, and parables that dispute the notion of unconditional love bestowed on unbelievers. 1Jn 4:8 teaches us, “God is love.” But God is also a jealous God and a God of wrath. We stay disobedient to His will and unrepentant of our sinful and evil ways at the risk of eternal punishment. John the Baptist was referring to Jesus when he said in Jn 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life but he who does not believe the Son will not see life since the wrath of God abides on him.” Why would anyone not want to be saved? The answer is in the verses just after John 3:16. The eisegetical error caused by misinterpretation of the verse becomes obvious when considering this verse in context. Exegesis of the one verse, producing an accurate interpretation, is possible by considering the companion verses which provide a fuller perspective. John writes in John 3:16-21, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. He who believes on him is not condemned but he who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the condemnation: Light has come into the world but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” These companion verses debilitate the idea of God’s unconditional love toward unbelievers.

These verses do not stand alone but others add context in understanding God’s love and His wrath. Obviously, any idea of God’s wrath is antithetical to God’s unconditional love. Paul teaches us in Rom 5:8-10, “God commends His love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we will be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”

Jesus taught about the day of judgment in Jn 5:22-29. There is little to reassure unbelievers who are relying on God’s unconditional love for a pass on the choices they make in this life. “The Father judges no man but has committed all judgment to the Son so that all men would honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not

honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, I say to you that he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has everlasting life and will not come into condemnation but is passed from death unto life. Truly, I say to you that the hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. As the Father has life in Himself so has He given to the Son to have life in himself and has given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astounded at this, for the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and will come forth. Those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of damnation.”

Before we repent and believe, we are separated from God. Herein, we are enemies of God and under His wrath. But Peter teaches in 2Pet 3:9, “The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some men count slowness, but is patient with us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” In Mat 11:28, Jesus said, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.” James 4:8 teaches, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Also, John wrote of Jesus in Rev 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and have supper with him, and he with me.”

Believers have assurance of the wonderful love of God. From Psalms 103: 11-12, we learn something of the extent of this love, “For as the heaven is high above the earth so great is God’s mercy toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” Heb 4:14-16 reassures us, “Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold tightly our profession of faith. For we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched by the feelings of our infirmities, but he was in all points tempted like we are, yet he was without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace so we may obtain mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

To summarize why belief in God’s unconditional love is unbiblical, this concise phrase exists nowhere in the Bible. Further, there is no exposition in the Bible of the idea conveyed by this phrase. This idea is found in the Bible only by forceful insertion of meaning where none had existed previously. Verses purporting to support this phrase have been taken out of context. Without further qualification and delimitation, advocates of this phrase mislead unbelievers about their current relationship with God, which is one of great jeopardy, with an implied, but false, reassurance.

It is no long stretch to think that an unbeliever who hears that God has unconditional love could misinterpret this to mean that actions have no consequences, and there is license to do whatever one wants without any penalty. This imagination would be particularly appealing to someone searching for validation of their lifestyle apart from God. Anyone teaching about God’s unconditional love, and wishing to ameliorate the “offense of the cross” (Gal 5:11), should keep in mind Jesus’ teaching in Lu 17:1-2. “He said to the disciples, ‘It is impossible to stop the sin that will come. But woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should lead one of these little ones into sin.’”