

GOD'S LOVE AND JUSTICE

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Contents

Introduction	9	
Chapter 1	God Loves Freely	11
Chapter 2	Covenantal Love	21
Chapter 3	To Be Pleasing to God	29
Chapter 4	God Is Passionate and Compassionate	38
Chapter 5	The Wrath of Divine Love	47
Chapter 6	God's Love of Justice	58
Chapter 7	The Problem of Evil	63
Chapter 8	Free Will, Love, and Divine Providence	71
Chapter 9	The Cosmic Conflict	80
Chapter 10	Rules of Engagement	89
Chapter 11	What More Could I Have Done?	100
Chapter 12	Love and Justice: The Two Greatest Commandments	108
Chapter 13	Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law	118

1

God Loves Freely

What is love? Here are some responses children gave when asked this question:

“Love is when a girl puts on perfume, and a boy puts on shaving cologne, and they go out and smell each other.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody all of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

“Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day.”

“Love is when a puppy licks your face, even after you left him alone all day.”

“Love is what makes you smile even when you are tired.”¹

These answers offer some adorable and beautiful insights but also some obvious problems. Might we also harbor problematic understandings of love, including of God’s love?

Lost in translation?

Perhaps you are among the many who have been taught that *agapē* is a unique kind of love that only God has, in contrast to *eros*.

God's Love and Justice

This highly influential view depends on a long line of thinkers, who are themselves influenced by streams of Greek philosophy.² A number of decades ago, a theologian named Anders Nygren set forth this understanding in his influential book *Agape and Eros*.

Among other things, Nygren taught that *agapē* is gift love, but *eros* is need love. *Eros* desires and acquires, but *agapē* is pure and sacrificial giving, never receiving. *Eros* is motivated by self-interest, but *agapē* only seeks the good of others. *Agapē* is unmotivated, spontaneous, and unconditional, but *eros* is motivated, conditional, and lasts only as long as its object fulfills its desire.³

Oft-repeated in popular and academic works, this understanding is very widespread. But does it match with Scripture's teachings about God's love?

At first glance, this understanding seems very appealing. On closer inspection, however, it runs counter to Scripture's teachings in some important ways.⁴ For one thing, this view of *agapē* (of Nygren) is closely linked to the view that God *arbitrarily* chooses to save some humans and reject others. This view (deterministic predestination) sees God's love as "election love," which is unconditional not only in the sense that it cannot be earned or merited but also in the sense that it is only available to the select few to whom God has chosen to grant eternal life (to those whom God *unconditionally* elects). In this view, God bestows some common blessings on those who are not elect, but only the elect receive God's love unto salvation—no one else can be saved.⁵ As Nygren writes, God's *agapē* love is such that "all choice on man's part is excluded."⁶

In this and other ways, this popular view of *agapē* does not fit with biblical teachings. Scripture teaches that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9; see also 1 Timothy 2:4–6). God does everything He can to save as many as He can (see Isaiah 5:1–4). God loves

God Loves Freely

everyone and invites all people into a special love relationship with Him so that “whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God calls everyone to “turn” to Him and “live” (Ezekiel 33:11), but some tragically reject God’s love.

It is true that God’s love is a giving love—manifest supremely in Christ’s sacrifice for us (John 15:13)—but it is not true that God’s love *never* receives. God’s love is always unselfish, always seeking others’ good, but God does receive love from humans (Psalm 18:1) and delights over His people (Zephaniah 3:17). Finally, it is true that God’s love is unconditional *in the sense* that God’s love is everlasting and that God never stops loving us. However, God gives humans the freedom to finally reject a love relationship with Him and the gift of eternal life, making the love relationship conditional (see chapter 2).

A closer look at *agapē*

Moreover, it is not true that *agapē* is uniquely descriptive of God’s love. First, the term *agapē* does not always have a positive meaning. For example, *agapē* is used of *misdirected* love when Paul writes that Demas forsook him, “having loved this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10; cf. John 3:19; 12:43). Additionally, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, common in the time of Jesus (the Septuagint/LXX), *agapē* is used to describe Amnon’s rapacious lust for his half sister Tamar (see 2 Samuel 13:1, 4, 15).

Second, *agapē* is just one of *many* words Scripture uses to describe God’s amazing love. For example, in John 16:27 Jesus teaches His followers, “The Father Himself loves [*phileō*] you, because you have loved [*phileō*] Me.” Notice that the Greek term for “love” here is *phileō*. Many claim that *phileō* expresses a lesser, deficient kind of love, in contrast to *agapē*, which they claim refers to higher, perfect love. However, in John 16:27, *phileō* cannot refer to a lesser, deficient love because there it refers to God’s love,

God's Love and Justice

which is never lesser or deficient. Accordingly, it cannot be true that *phileō* itself denotes a lesser or deficient kind of love.⁷

God's love is indeed unique, but there is no unique term for God's love. Scripture uses a variety of words to describe God's love, but no single term is capable of expressing the full majesty of God's infinite love. For example, the Hebrew term *hesed* (often translated "lovingkindness") expresses God's steadfast, covenantal love and mercy, and the Hebrew term *raham* refers to God's compassion, based on imagery of a mother's womb—expressing a womb-like mother love.⁸

When used of God's love, *agapē* describes only the highest and best "love," but that is not because *agapē* can only refer to that kind of love, but because it is God who loves and God's love is always perfect. Indeed, God's love is far greater than what many of us have been led to believe by traditional teachings about "*agapē*."

In this and the next few chapters, I will unpack the good news of the following four wonderful teachings of Scripture about God's love:

First, God's love for others is **volitional**, meaning God's love is *freely* given, though not arbitrary or capricious.

Second, God's love is **covenantal**, meaning God's love is steadfast for us, and God expects creatures to love Him and others steadfastly in response.

Third, God's love is **evaluative**, meaning God's love includes pleasure and delight over His people, while God is also displeased by evil.

Fourth, God's love is **emotional**, involving profound passion and compassion for us and pain and grief when people harm themselves or others.

I will show compassion

"Please, show me Your glory," Moses requested of God after

God Loves Freely

Israel's rebellion with the golden calf (Exodus 33:18). After being delivered from slavery in the most amazing fashion in the Exodus, Israel had fallen into deep rebellion. While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, the people worshiped a calf of gold as if it delivered them from Egypt, effectively rejecting God and shattering the covenant.

In response to this rebellion, God said to Moses, "Let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). Let me alone? Why would God say anything to Moses about this if He truly wanted to be "let alone"? Here, God is effectively prompting and *inviting* Moses to intercede for the people. Moses did intercede, and God "relented" (Exodus 32:14).⁹ But when Moses came down from the mountain and saw the people's detestable acts, his "anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19).

Just as Moses shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the people had shattered the covenant, forfeiting any claim to God's covenant promises. God had every right to reject them. Would He continue to be *with* them? If not, all hope was lost. Without God's special presence and protection, they would never survive in the wilderness.

Yet God's special presence with them also posed great danger. Without mediation, sin cannot be in the presence of the perfectly holy God. As God warned, "You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you" (Exodus 33:5, NASB). This presents a huge problem. They need God to be with them to survive, but (without mediation) if God goes in their midst, they will be destroyed due to their sinfulness.

Earlier, God commanded Moses, "Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). Yet the sanctuary had not yet been built, and now, whether it would be built seemed to be in

God's Love and Justice

question. The only way that God could go in their midst without destroying them is if He made a way to mediate His presence. But would He? If not, the Israelites would be hopeless—and, by extension, so would we.

Moses repeatedly pleaded that God would continue to be specially present *with* the people of Israel, even in their midst. In response, God said He would do just as Moses asked (Exodus 33:12–17). Finally, Moses made one last audacious request. “Please, show me Your glory” (verse 18). In response, God proclaimed, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (verse 19).

Moses asked to see God's *glory*. In response, God promised to show His *goodness*. Integral to God's glory is His character of love. But what about the following statement that God will be gracious and compassionate to whom He wills? Does this mean, as some suppose, that God arbitrarily chooses to be gracious and compassionate to some, but not to others? There is no hint in this story that God arbitrarily chooses some and not others to receive His compassion. Rather, after the golden calf rebellion, the people were called by Moses to make their choice for or against God (Exodus 32:26).

Further, as many biblical scholars note, the Hebrew phrase translated “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” builds on the phrase from the burning bush encounter in Exodus 3:14, where God declared, “I AM WHO I AM.”¹⁰ Accordingly, God's declaration in Exodus 33:19 may be translated: “I will proclaim before you the name [LORD], and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show” (JPS).

Here, God proclaims that as the one true God, He has the

God Loves Freely

unique right to *freely* grant grace and compassion even though sinners are utterly undeserving. Though God had every right to reject the people, He did not. Instead, despite their rebellion, God freely bestowed compassionate, gracious love that far exceeded any reasonable expectations, choosing to continue in special relationship with Israel.

This is one example, among many, of the good news of the *volitional* aspect of God's love. Even though we never deserve God's love and could do nothing to earn it, God has the right to bestow compassionate, gracious love on us and chooses to freely do so on all who are willing to receive it (see, e.g., John 3:16). God's love is freely given but must also be freely received.

Love freely given and freely received

If you had the power to control someone's mind, could you make them love you? No. Why not? Because love, by definition, requires freedom. Love must be freely given and freely received.¹¹ Even if you could make them exhibit behaviors that accompany love, it would not be *genuine* love, for it would not be freely given.

Throughout Scripture, two of God's favorite metaphors of love for His people are the marriage and parent-child metaphors. Both portray God's *free* decision to bestow love on His people. In the parent-child metaphor, God rescued and "adopted" His people from the wilderness and brought them up in love (see Hosea 11:1–4; cf. Deuteronomy 32:10, 11). Likewise, the marriage metaphor shows God's willing commitment to love those who have no right to receive it (see Hosea 2; 3). Hosea depicts God as the metaphorical husband of Israel. But God's "bride" (the people) are continually unfaithful, repeatedly cheating on Him, going after other "lovers" (the gods of the nations), breaking the relationship seemingly beyond repair.

But God does not give up on His people. He freely bestows

God's Love and Justice

amazing love on them nonetheless, declaring: “I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from” them (Hosea 14:4). The English word *freely* can mean different things. The gospel is “free” in that it is without price and cost. This is also true of God’s love, but that is not what “freely” means in Hosea 14:4. Rather, the Hebrew term translated “freely” (*nedabah*) is used of freewill offerings and connotes the “determinative . . . element of freewill,” referring to that which is offered “totally voluntarily.”¹²

God’s people did not deserve God’s love—neither do we. They had forfeited any claim to the benefits of God’s love—so have we. Yet God freely and willingly continued to bestow love on them, despite no obligation to do so. He likewise *freely* bestows love on us, though we are utterly undeserving.

Here and elsewhere, Scripture consistently displays God’s love as free and voluntary. Not only is God not obligated to continue to bestow gracious love on sinners who have rebelled against Him, but God was not obligated to create us—or any world—in the first place. Before God created anything, God already enjoyed a love relationship within the Trinity (see John 17:24). He did not need to create, but God freely decided to enter into a relationship with creatures.

Then when Adam and Eve fell, God had every right to destroy humans altogether. But instead, God graciously preserved humanity and freely continued to love humans, despite our fallen state, even to the point of being willing to become human (in Christ) and die for us Himself. Amazing. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

God’s love is entirely free and greater than we could possibly imagine (see John 15:13). However, that God has chosen to love us does not mean love is equivalent to, or reducible to, a choice. Love includes choice but involves much more. God does not force

God Loves Freely

His love on anyone but invites everyone to respond positively to His love. As Ellen White puts it, “The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened.”¹³

This, among other things, is what Jesus teaches in His parable of the wedding banquet. Therein, He tells a story of a master of a house who “sent out his servants to call [Greek *kaleō*] those who were invited to the wedding,” but “they were not willing to come” (Matthew 22:3). Thus, the master tells his servants, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite [*kaleō*] to the wedding” (verses 8, 9). The servants did so and gathered many people (verse 10).

At the end of this parable, Jesus makes this striking statement, “Many are called [*klētos*, a form of *kaleō*], but few are chosen” (verse 14). Those who are finally “chosen” (the “elect”), then, are those who accepted the Lord’s invitation to the wedding. God calls—that is, invites—everyone to His wedding feast (cf. Revelation 3:20). However, we can reject the invitation and reject God’s love.

Conclusion

Freedom is essential to love, both divine and human. God will never force His love on anyone but grants us freedom to return His love or reject it. Sadly, some reject a love relationship with God.

Thus, Christ wept over Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34; cf. Matthew 23:37). Yet He went to the cross for these people and for us. Amazing love.

God's Love and Justice

God freely bestows His love on each person and grants them the freedom to love Him in return. He asks only one simple question: Do you love Me?

1. Anonymous author/compiler, printed in Kathy Mitchell and Marcy Sugar, "The Meaning of Love From the Mouths of Babies," *Chicago Tribune*, February 14, 2003, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-02-14-0302140295-story.html>.

2. See John C. Peckham, "Agape Versus Eros? The Biblical Semantics of Divine Love," chap. 3 in *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

3. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1953), 75–81, 92, 210.

4. For much more on this, see Peckham, *Love of God*.

5. As J. I. Packer put it, God "loves all in some ways" and He loves "some in all ways." Packer, "The Love of God: Universal and Particular," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 283.

6. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 213.

7. See, in this regard, D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 31, 32, 51–53. See, further, Peckham, "Agape Versus Eros?"

8. See J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 252.

9. See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1958), 318.

10. For one example, see Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 214.

11. See John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 42–45.

12. J. Conrad, "בדן," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Joseph Fabry, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 220, 222.

13. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 22.