

When is God's Love Conditional?

by Robert Babecka

I recently noticed that many Catholics, including clergy, are describing God's love as unconditional¹. Although a true statement, it will lead to a misunderstanding of our relationship with God if people do not realize God's love for us is also conditional.

When I first heard God's love described as unconditional I became worried people would then conclude that our salvation was assured, regardless of our behavior. It seemed to be a clear path to the creed shared by some Protestants of "once saved, always saved."² Of course, people could only reach this conclusion if they believed that all aspects of God's love were unconditional.

Sure enough, my suspicions were realized. I soon heard a homily in which God's unconditional love was mentioned and that God doesn't expect anything of us. The homilist even stated that the purpose of the sacrament of reconciliation was to help us better live our lives for God (true), but he made no mention that it was necessary for the forgiveness of mortal sins.

There were further problems.

- Some people say that while God's love is unconditional we simply choose to accept it or not. If we go to hell it is not because God loves us less and sent us there, but because WE CHOSE to go to hell.
- Others have concluded that, since God loves unconditionally, He loves everyone with the same amount of love. To love otherwise would not be fair.
- It is also common to hear that God's love for us is infinite. Obviously, if He loves us infinitely, then He must love us unconditionally AND equally.

My Proposals

1. God's love for us can change. If we love God more He may love us more. If we love Him less He may love us less.
2. Most people do not choose to go to hell. They just choose to sin. God then decides to send them to hell.
3. God loves different people different amounts.

¹ The Church has not formally defined the term "unconditional." For the sake of this discussion I will use definitions provided by the *Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*. "Unconditional" is defined as "not subject to conditions, complete." "Condition" is defined as a "stipulation" or "something upon which the fulfillment of something depends."

² In discussions with Protestant Christians who accept this creed they will sometimes justify it by claiming that God's love is unconditional.

My First Proposal

God's love for us can change. If we love God more He may love us more. If we love Him less He may love us less.

My Arguments

1. Nowhere in Sacred Scripture does it mention that God's love for us is independent of our response to Him (unconditional). In fact, there are several statements that indicate otherwise. The clearest is in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 14, verse 21;

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

Simply stated we love God if we keep His commandments. If we love God He will love us. If His love were unconditional (in this instance) Our Lord would not have mentioned the condition of our love.

The word used for love in this passage is "ἀγαπάω" (agapaō).

2. There is no direct teaching in the Catholic Church that God's love is unconditional. There is no mention of God's love being unconditional in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or other authoritative Church documents. There is no mention of God's love being unconditional in the writings of the Church fathers.

Therefore, describing God's love as conditional is consistent with Sacred Scripture and Church teaching.

However, there is plenty of evidence from Sacred Scripture that God loved us before we repented. In fact, He sent His only Son to die for us. Also, He would not bother to create human beings who will live forever unless He did love them, at least enough to keep them around. Is this a contradiction?

The writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and Dietrich Von Hildebrand provide explanations.

St. Thomas Aquinas

In the *Summa Theologica*, question 20, God's Love, St. Thomas Aquinas makes the following statements;

- God loves sinners in so far as they are existing natures; for they have existence and have it from Him. In so far as they are sinners, they have not existence at all, but fall short of it; and this in them is not from God. **Hence under this aspect, they are hated by Him.**
- For whether innocent or penitent, **those are the better and better loved who have most grace.**
- I answer that, It must needs be, according to what has been said before, that God loves more the better things . **For it has been shown (2, 3), that God's loving one thing more than another is nothing else than His willing for that thing a greater good: because God's will is the cause of goodness in things; and the reason why some things are better than others, is that God wills for them a greater good. Hence it follows that He loves more the better things.**

- Since God's will is the cause of goodness in things, the goodness of one who is loved by God is to be reckoned according to the time when some good is to be given to him by divine goodness. According therefore to the time, **when there is to be given by the divine will to the predestined sinner a greater good, the sinner is better**; although according to some other time he is the worse; because even according to some time he is neither good nor bad.

We can see here that St. Thomas pointed out that the gift of grace from God to a person is a result of His love for that person. When God loves us more He gives us more grace. Since He gratuitously gives us grace in response to our actions it would follow God may love those more who do His will.

Dietrich Von Hildebrand

In [*The Nature of Love*](#) Dietrich Von Hildebrand explained that love is a response to value. If we see value in something, we love it...at least a little. But the term can be used two ways. A man can place great value in another person and be willing to die for that person because of love. If the love does not seek for itself we can call it a true love. A man might mean this if he says he loves a woman. When a child says that he loves candy he is responding to value, but that is different. His love for the candy is solely focused on the good that it can bring him. True, he is responding to value, but only in a utilitarian way. Sadly, a man might mean this if he says that he loves a woman. The only similarity between these loves is that each is a response to value.

When God loves someone He is recognizing value in that person and responding to that value. He is not utilitarian, but true in His love.

God loves every human person. That is why He keeps them forever in existence, even if they have permanently rejected Him.

Why does He love someone who hates Him? What value does every single human being possess?

Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. So this “minimum” amount of divine love, a love that keeps us in existence and offers us salvation (until death) if we repent, believe, and act, is given to everyone who is human UNCONDITIONALLY. God does love us unconditionally. The love of the father for the prodigal son could rightly be described as unconditional because the father was waiting with open arms (and love) despite the son's rejection.

Is that all of the love available to us from God? Does He love those in heaven who truly love Him no more than He loves those in hell? I hope not. If our love for Him did not result in Him loving us more then that means our love for God has no value to God. That would be a sad reality indeed.

Fortunately, our love for God does have value. Because He values our love for Him and our imperfect repentance He desires to spend eternity in relationship with us. If we love Him greatly He will reward us in heaven with a greater relationship with Him. He will want that greater relationship and work to bring it about. That part of His love is VERY conditional. It is conditional on our love, which can be measured by our willingness to do His will and keep His commandments.

This is the love we really want from God and from others. We want them to recognize our intrinsic worth as human beings and to love us for that. Additionally, we want them to appreciate our actions and virtues and commitment and love us more greatly for the good in us. Would any woman want a husband who would always love her unconditionally because he had chosen her as his wife, but never grow in love as

he got to know her better? This would be a man who never discovered any new value in the woman he loved.

Unconditional love alone is inferior to unconditional and conditional love because it does not allow for our response to touch our lover's heart.

My Second Proposal

People rarely choose to go to hell. They just choose to sin. God then decides to send them to hell.

Explanation

We go to hell not because we explicitly choose to go there, but because we do not choose to love God. Since we do not love Him, He does not love us beyond the unconditional love that every human being gets. Since He loves our humanness, which is the image and likeness of God, He will not destroy us. Since we have not accepted His offer of redemption, we must pay the debt. We have offended an infinite being, so we must pay the debt in hell until it is completely paid.

Why does this distinction matter? Is it just semantics?

It matters greatly because the natural (and false) conclusion from the belief that only people who choose to go to hell end up there is that you cannot go to hell without formally making such a choice.

This idea, known in theological parlance as the "fundamental option," has been condemned as contrary to Catholic teaching, most recently in *Veritatis Splendor*, sections 65-68. The Church teaches that it only takes the commission of one mortal sin to lose heaven...whether or not the sinner actually explicitly seeks damnation.³

So if an individual falsely believes that the only people in hell explicitly chose hell he will feel a strong assurance that his salvation is intact, because he knows he made no such choice. With such "assurance" he will believe that he can sin safely.

The Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 13, verses 41 and 42, show that God casts people into hell.

The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

The Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 25, verses 41 thru 46, show that God then pronounces judgment on those sent to hell.

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

³ In point of fact, man does not suffer perdition only by being unfaithful to that fundamental option whereby he has made "a free self-commitment to God". With every freely committed mortal sin, he offends God as the giver of the law and as a result becomes guilty with regard to the entire law (cf. Jas 2:8-11); even if he perseveres in faith, he loses "sanctifying grace", "charity" and "eternal happiness". As the Council of Trent teaches, "the grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin". (*Veritatis Splendor*, section 68)

In a nutshell, God SENDS those to hell who CHOOSE to remain in sin.

My Third Proposal

God loves different people different amounts.

Explanation

St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 9, verse 13, states, "As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" It seems clear, even if one assumes that this is hyperbole, that God at least loved Esau less than He loved Jacob.

Additionally, St. Thomas Aquinas answered this question directly in the *Summa Theologica*. (St. Thomas Aquinas himself referred to St. Augustine's writings on the subject.)

Whether God loves all things equally?

Objection 1: It seems that God loves all things equally. For it is said: "He hath equally care of all" (Wis. 6:8). But God's providence over things comes from the love wherewith He loves them. Therefore He loves all things equally.

Objection 2: Further, the love of God is His essence. But God's essence does not admit of degree; neither therefore does His love. He does not therefore love some things more than others.

Objection 3: Further, as God's love extends to created things, so do His knowledge and will extend. But God is not said to know some things more than others; nor will one thing more than another. Neither therefore does He love some things more than others.

On the contrary, Augustine says (Tract. in Joan. cx): "God loves all things that He has made, and amongst them rational creatures more, and of these especially those who are members of His only-begotten Son Himself."

I answer that, since to love a thing is to will it good, in a twofold way anything may be loved more, or less. In one way on the part of the act of the will itself, which is more or less intense. In this way God does not love some things more than others, because He loves all things by an act of the will that is one, simple, and always the same. In another way on the part of the good itself that a person wills for the beloved. In this way we are said to love that one more than another, for whom we will a greater good, though our will is not more intense. In this way we must needs say that God loves some things more than others. For since God's love is the cause of goodness in things, as has been said [148](A[2]), no one thing would be better than another, if God did not will greater good for one than for another.

Reply to Objection 1: God is said to have equally care of all, not because by His care He deals out equal good to all, but because He administers all things with a like wisdom and goodness.

Reply to Objection 2: This argument is based on the intensity of love on the part of the act of the will, which is the divine essence. But the good that God wills for His creatures, is not the divine essence. Therefore there is no reason why it may not vary in degree.

Reply to Objection 3: To understand and to will denote the act alone, and do not include in their meaning objects from the diversity of which God may be said to know or will more or less, as has been said with respect to God's love.

Challenge

God is unchanging; therefore His love for us must be unchanging and unconditional.

Response

God is unchanging. His response to a particular value is always the same. If He loves virtue today He will love virtue tomorrow. If our virtue increases, God's constancy will cause Him to love us more.

Challenge

God's love is like the sunshine. It shines the same everywhere. We can hide in the shadows, perhaps mortal sin. We can see the sunlight through a window, perhaps a window dirty with venial sin.

Response

In *The Story of a Soul* St. Therese of Lisieux discussed why all souls do not receive an equal measure of grace. Her explanation was that each soul was like a flower created by God. Some were called to be roses, some daisies. God also plants each flower where He wills. The type of flower and where it is planted determines the sunlight needed and the maximum sunlight available. Some flowers naturally grow in the shade and receive less sunlight. While the intensity of the Sun (God's love) may be unchanging, not every flower (person) will receive the same intensity of light (love).

Unlike God, the sun has no relationship with the objects upon which it shines. The shining of the sun does not involve an act of the will of the sun. The sun does not decide which type each flower will be or whether it will be planted in sun or shade. The love of God is more accurately compared to the love of creatures made in His image and likeness than the transfer of energy from an unthinking object.

Challenge

God loves us infinitely therefore His love for us must be unconditional. If it was conditional it could not be infinite. If it is not infinite it is not divine.

Response

God's thought is infinite. For that to be true He must have an infinite expression of His thought. We know that among humans a word expresses a thought. God's Word is His full expression of His thought, His infinite expression of His thought. The Word of God is the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity. God also expresses His thought in His creation, but in a finite way. The entire universe is just a finite thought of an infinite God.

Likewise, God's love is infinite. The Father and the Son love each other with an infinite intensity. The First and Second Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity unite to express this love and this expression is the Third Person of the Most Blessed Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is what proceeds from infinite love. Being infinitely less than the Holy Spirit even the Blessed Virgin Mary is only loved finitely.

Challenge

Ideally, parents love their children with unconditional love. A good parent would not love a child less, simply because the child misbehaves.

Response

A good mother might give her life for her child, either in death or in service, regardless of the response of the child. She values that child simply because he is her child. That love is unconditional. She might be willing to give all that she has for that child, regardless of the response of that child. She can give that child everything she has because the value that she sees in the child is greater than anything that she has.

God cannot value the good in us more than everything He has. God realizes that the good in us is much less.

Both responses, the unconditional love of the mother and the conditional love of God, make sense when compared with the value of what is offered because of that love.

Summary

God's love is more wonderful than our poor finite minds can comprehend. To best understand and appreciate the great gift of the love that God offers us we must strive to contemplate this love with the mind of the Church that Our Lord has established. We must cleanse our contemplation of modern, western concepts and constructs that may appear to praise His love, but instead either diminish God's other virtues or create in our minds a false relationship with the infinite God. By starting with the reality that God's love can change in response to our obedience to Him, that by choosing to sin greatly God's justice demands our punishment in hell, and that God loves different individuals different amounts for His own purposes we are less likely to take God's love for granted and more likely to do our part to increase His love for us, such as avoiding sin.

O Lord God, help me to love you above all things and love my neighbor for your sake because you are the highest, infinite and perfect good, worthy of all my love. Amen.