

The Love of God

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After the *Ensign* published “Divine Love” by Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in February 2003, some Church members were disconcerted over his primary thesis, namely, that while God’s love may be divine, perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal, it is *not* unconditional. Some, perhaps insecure in their own individual worth, worried that if God’s love is not unconditional, if it is given only as we keep the commandments, then certainly “He can’t love me, because I’m so imperfect.” Others felt that this limitation on God’s love was somehow a limitation on His eternal nature, His very Godhood. Still others expressed concern that this declaration, right or wrong, would simply give Church critics more ammunition to use against us.

These reactions and others may well indicate that many Church members have misunderstood not only Elder Nelson’s message but also the nature of God and the nature of love itself. If we correctly understand what love is, what God’s perfection entails, how He perceives us from His eternal viewpoint, and how grace can make us more capable of receiving His love, I believe we will not only agree with Elder Nelson’s thesis but also feel grateful for this wonderful insight into our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

What Is Love?

Perhaps the greatest misconception about love is the notion that it is merely a feeling, an emotion that someone else feels toward us

or that we feel for others. But the assumption that love is primarily a warm, fuzzy emotion misses the mark entirely. This is actually a romantic notion that shares little common ground with reality. Let me illustrate with a couple of everyday examples.

Does my wife really care whether or not I have a constant warm, starry-eyed feeling toward her? We've been happily married for over twenty-three years now, and based on that fairly substantial experience I would have to answer no. What is she really concerned about? Let me suggest that an affirmative answer to the following questions would tell my wife more about my love for her than any emotions I might be experiencing. Do I help her around the house? Do I treat her with kindness and respect? Do I make it obvious that I enjoy her company? Do I rescue her from cooking dinner at least once a week? Do I help her with the kids? Are we united in our ongoing attempt to live the gospel? Do I support her in her Church calling? Am I committed to her happiness and well-being? Do I sacrifice my own desires and convenience to make her life more pleasant?

By the same token, do my children really care whether or not I have a constant warm, sweet feeling toward them? Based on nearly twenty years' experience, I would again have to answer, probably not. So what are they interested in? Perhaps these questions hit nearer the mark: Do I spend time with them? Do I try to control the urge to criticize or belittle them? Do I treat their mother well? Do I provide a house, food, transportation, and a little entertainment for them? Do I take an interest in their activities, their concerns, their friends? Do I attend their basketball and soccer games and their tennis matches? Do I wait up for them when they are out late? Am I there for them when they need me? Am I consistent in my expectations, the rules I establish, and the consequences I enforce when they break those rules?

Several writers and speakers have pointed out that love is not just a noun. In fact, in every significant way we generally view it, love is very much a verb. "If ye love me," the Savior said, "keep my commandments" (John 14:15). If we don't obey him, He can be quite sure that we don't love Him.

But what about the Savior's love for us? How do we view His love? Are we really concerned about whether or not Jesus Christ has a warm, fuzzy feeling about us? Not at all, I would argue. Oh, we assume it's there somewhere in the background. But what is in the foreground? When we talk about His love, we speak of His willingness to condescend from His throne on high to rescue us. We speak of the Garden of Gethsemane, the cross, the people He healed, the way of life He taught

and exemplified, His modern-day appearance to Joseph Smith, His forgiveness, and the grace He offers us. We are more concerned about what the Savior *did* and what He *does* than about how He *feels*.

The parable of the two sons addresses this very issue. The father asked both to go work in his vineyard. The first said he wouldn't go but repented and went. The second said he would go but didn't. The Savior then asks, "Whether of them twain did the will of his father?" The lesson is obvious. The one who did the will of his father was the one who loved him more; and the greater reward, He explained, goes to those who *do* their Father's will: "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you [chief priests and elders]" (Matthew 21:31; see also vv. 28–32). In this sense, Elder Nelson's emphasis on God's blessings and how they are always conditioned upon our obedience is very appropriate as an example of *how* He manifests His love for us.

If we want to consider love as a noun, we should probably think of it more as a commitment than as an emotion. If you love your spouse, you are committed to his or her happiness and well-being. If you love your children, you are committed to their physical and spiritual health and their well-being. If you love God, you are committed to do His will. Love is a commitment. And we keep commitments through actions, not through emotions.

Does God's Love Have Limits?

If God's love is unconditional, then it has no limits and makes no distinction between the various persons or things He might love. But distinctions are necessary. As Lehi pointed out, "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death. . . . Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; . . . Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God" (2 Nephi 2:11–12).

Lehi is trying to explain to Jacob that opposites must exist. If there are no opposites, there is no existence. If there is no darkness, light is a meaningless concept. If there is no evil, then good cannot exist either. Opposites define each other and give each other meaning. And because these opposites exist, intelligent beings can have an existence filled with

meaning and agency. By understanding the difference between good and evil, we are able to choose between the two. We learn to love goodness and hate evil.

If God's love is unconditional, however, then He cannot make any such distinction. He must love evil as much as He loves goodness. He must love Lucifer as much as He loves His Beloved Son. I doubt that even those of us who insist that God's love is unconditional would wish to place this restriction upon Him. Thus, perfect love is not without limits. Perfect love must exist within certain bounds. Our Father, being perfectly pure, cannot love evil. And since "Satan is evil: totally and always,"¹ God cannot love him at all.

Were God's love unconditional, He would have to love evil. But the scriptures teach that God doesn't love everything or everyone equally. Indeed, God even hates some things and some people. "I have hated the congregation of evil doers" (Psalm 26:5), He says through the Psalmist. "Six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him" (Proverbs 6:16), and the scripture then lists seven sins. "Hate the evil, and love the good" (Amos 5:15). "I loved Jacob," the Lord exclaims, "And I hated Esau" (Malachi 1:2-3).

It can be argued that if God's love were unconditional, then that love would not be perfect, and neither would He. A God who loves evil cannot be perfect, especially if we consider love an act or a commitment rather than just an emotion. Likewise, those who argue that it is possible to love the sinner but hate the sin try to separate what people do from what they are. But this is very difficult, if not impossible. What we are is, to a large degree, a consequence of what we do; and what we do is, in turn, a fruit of what we are. This may seem like circular logic, a vicious circle, and so it is. There is only so much a person can change through self-improvement. Fortunately, the Lord offers a different program. He offers to change us through the Atonement, to give us a new heart, a new birth, to make us more lovable, if you will, more capable of receiving the visible effects of His love, His blessings.

And this is the focus of God's love. It is not just a warm feeling toward His children. It is a commitment—a commitment to save them, to exalt them if possible. If there is even a speck of goodness in us, even just a desire to be good, that is enough for God to extend His love toward us, to be committed to our improvement, our salvation, and, if possible, our exaltation. He will change us if we accept His proffered grace. Only when we have completely turned our backs on Him and His love are His hands tied. Then He can do nothing for us, as He can do nothing for Lucifer.

But as we accept His love, as we become more like Him through His grace, this new godly nature within us then bears fruit in our behavior. “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20) is a foolproof formula. What we do is a manifestation of what we are. If God cannot love what we do, He certainly cannot love what we are. “Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. . . . Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 7:17, 19).

In short, if we embrace evil, God cannot love us as He can if we embrace good. And of course He cannot bless us as He desires to bless us if we do evil. If there is any good in us, He will love and bless that goodness and do everything He can to nurture it and help it grow, but He will not infringe upon our agency.

Eternal Love

Sometimes we project our mortal limitations upon God. We assume His existence and His perception of His surroundings are similar to ours. We think of Him as being much like we are, only glorified and perfect. But God is eternal, and that is a significant difference that affects how He loves.

God’s love is infinite and eternal. “It is infinite,” says Elder Nelson, “because the Atonement was an act of love for all who ever lived, who now live, and who will ever live.”² But God’s love is also eternal. Eternal, we understand from scripture, is a *quality* of God’s existence, not merely an endless duration of time. “Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I Am, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made; *the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes*” (D&C 38:1–2; emphasis added). He and His Father see the end from the beginning—they have seen our end condition from the beginning—which certainly must define the bounds of Their eternal love for us.

We can’t comprehend God’s *feelings* for us because He isn’t viewing us only in this instant. He views us as eternal beings. He sees our beginning and our end and everything in between. His *feelings*, then, must be constant and eternal, the same yesterday, today, and forever. He doesn’t love me more now, less tomorrow when I yell at my kids, then more next week when I visit the widow and the fatherless. His feelings don’t fluctuate depending on what I’m doing at the moment, because all moments are there before His eyes. He sees me as an eternal

being. I submit that it is impossible for us to understand His feelings for us because we cannot see the eternal panorama He views. He is eternal. Perhaps this is why John declared that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It is one of His constant, eternal, defining attributes.

But what we are really interested in when we talk about God’s love are His blessings, His acts of love toward us, just as Elder Nelson suggests in his article. Those blessings are predicated upon our obedience to His commandments. Blessings are the manifestation of His love, of Himself. And those blessings, as we struggle here in mortality, are tied not to how God sees us with His eternal perspective but to our individual acts of righteousness in the here and now. Our obedience does indeed bring forth blessings (see D&C 130:20–21). Thus, even if God sees that in the long run I am headed for the telestial kingdom because of sins I will someday commit and not repent of, He will still bless me now for paying tithing and being honest, and serving diligently as a ward clerk or a Primary teacher. Not only is He bound by eternal law to bless those who do good and keep His commandments, but He loves to bless those who obey Him.

The Real Question

After Lehi tells his family about his dream of the tree of life, his son Nephi wants to see the things his father has seen. Nephi is soon “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord . . . into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1). There he is shown “the things which [his] father saw” (v. 3). But after Nephi sees the tree of life, he wants to know more. He wants to know “the interpretation thereof” (v. 11). Consequently, he is shown another vision, this time of the birth of Jesus Christ.

After he has seen this, the angel asks him, “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (v. 21). And he answers, “Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things” (v. 22).

We can learn much from Nephi’s answer. First, the Savior is a literal representation of God’s love for us. In a very real way He is God’s love, which was given for all of His children. Second, this love, symbolized by the tree of life, is available for all to partake of. But it is not easy. A central message of Lehi’s dream seems to be that reaching the tree takes great effort, and many obstacles can prevent us from reaching it. We have to pay a price to partake of God’s love.

Lehi also learns that even though partaking of God’s love (the fruit of the tree) brings great joy, some apparently don’t appreciate the

fruit. They partake, then become “ashamed, because of those that [are] scoffing at them; and they [fall] away into forbidden paths and [are] lost” (1 Nephi 8:28). We could ask why they turn away from the tree, but that is another topic. The important point is that the tree and its fruit are made equally available to all. If they are willing to put forth the effort and cling to the iron rod, all of God’s children can partake of His love. Some, like Nephi and Sam and Sariah, come and partake. Others, like Laman and Lemuel, refuse. The reason they do not receive of God’s love is not because they are not invited or because the path to the tree is blocked, but because they refuse to pay the price.

When we quibble over whether God’s love is or is not conditional, I fear we miss the point entirely. The real question is not whether God loves us unconditionally. That question is actually irrelevant. The fact is, *God’s love is equally available to everyone*. It is not available to only some of His children. He *offers* it to all. God *is* love. He is a fountain of love. The question isn’t whether or not He loves us. The only question we need to worry about is whether we will *receive* His love, whether we will come to the fountain and drink. It is our choice. We can have as much of His love, as many of His blessings, as we are willing to accept—or as little. **RE**

Notes

1. Marion G. Romney, “Satan, the Great Deceiver,” *Ensign*, February 2005, 54.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Divine Love,” *Ensign*, February 2003, 20.