

As the Father Has Loved Me

On the Love of God and What It Demands of His People

Most of us could recite the command from memory. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” (John 13:34, ESV) We learned it in Sunday school. We have seen it on bumper stickers and coffee mugs, usually abbreviated to the point where the second half disappears. Love one another. It sounds gentle, manageable, the kind of thing decent people already do. But Jesus does not say “love one another.” He says “love one another *just as I have loved you*.” The qualifier changes everything. The standard is His love, and His love went to the cross.

Two chapters later, in the Upper Room, He makes the standard even more explicit: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12–13) The measure of the love He commands is the measure of the love He gave. He is not handing His disciples a moral principle they can fulfill with good manners. He is pointing them to a sacrifice that will happen within hours and telling them that the love on display at Calvary is the love they owe each other. What follows is an attempt to trace where that love comes from, what it has looked like across the history of God’s dealings with His people, and what it demands of anyone who has received it.

I. The Command That Preaches the Gospel

In Luke's account of the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus pushes the love command past the borders of the believing community and into territory that would have scandalized His audience: "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27–28) This is not a softened version of the command. It is the full reach of it. Jesus tells a crowd of people living under Roman occupation to love the very people who oppress them. He tells people whose neighbors include tax collectors, informants, and Gentile soldiers to do good to the ones who have done them harm.

And then He gives the reason: "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:35–36) The logic here is staggering. Love your enemies because that is what God does. He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. The command to love our enemies is a description of the gospel tucked inside an imperative. God loved His enemies. That is the entire story of redemption in a single sentence. Paul says the same thing without the imperative wrapper: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) And again: "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." (Romans 5:10)

Every person who has ever come to faith in Christ was, at the moment God set His love upon them, an enemy. We were ungrateful. We were, in the language of Luke 6, evil. And God was kind to us. When Jesus tells His disciples to love their enemies, He is telling them to do what the Father has already done for them. The command assumes the gospel. It requires the gospel. No one can love an enemy in the way Jesus describes without first having been loved as an enemy by God. The imperative rests on the indicative, and the indicative is the cross.

II. The Source: As the Father Has Loved Me

If the love Christ commands is grounded in the love He has shown us, the next question is where His love comes from. Jesus answers this directly: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” (John 15:9) The love Christ has for His people is not something He generated independently. It flows from the Father’s love for the Son. And that love has no beginning. In John 17, praying in full view of the cross, Jesus says: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17:24)

Before there was a world. Before there was a people to save. Before there was sin to redeem. The Father loved the Son. This love is not reactive. It does not arise in response to anything the Son has done, because the Son has always been the Son. The Father’s love for Him belongs to the eternal relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, as essential to the divine life as the divine nature itself. The Westminster Confession speaks of the three Persons as “the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” The love between them is as eternal and unchangeable as the substance they share.

And this is the love that has been extended to believers. Jesus makes it explicit at the end of His prayer: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:26) The purpose of Christ’s entire ministry of revelation, from the incarnation through the present intercession, is that the Father’s eternal love for the Son would come to dwell in His people. The chain is unbroken: the Father loves the Son eternally, the Son loves His people with that same love, and the people of God are commanded to love one another and even their enemies with that same love still. The water does not change as it flows downstream.

John puts it plainly in his first epistle: “God is love.” (1 John 4:8) He does not say God has love, as though love were a quality He possesses alongside other qualities. God is love. Love belongs to His being. And because God is triune, this love is not solitary. It is the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The love that reaches believers through the gospel is the overflow of that communion into the created order. Paul describes the mechanism: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5, ESV) The Spirit takes the love that belongs to the inner life of the Godhead and plants it in the hearts of those who are united to Christ by faith. That is the source. Everything else follows from it.

III. The Love of God in Action

If we want to understand what this love looks like when it meets human rebellion, the Old Testament gives us a gallery of examples. Consider Jonah. Jonah is a prophet who understands the character of God perfectly well and hates what it means. When God tells him to preach to Nineveh, Jonah runs. He runs because he knows what will happen. After God brings him back through the belly of a fish and Nineveh repents, Jonah’s worst fear is confirmed. He is furious, and his complaint reveals the real issue: “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” (Jonah 4:2)¹

Jonah fled because he knew God would show mercy to pagans. He did not want Nineveh spared. He wanted Nineveh burned. And God’s response to Jonah is one of the most remarkable

¹Jonah is quoting the covenant formula of Exodus 34:6–7, which God spoke of Himself at Sinai.

lines in all of Scripture: “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11) God loves a city full of people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. He loves them in their ignorance, in their violence, in their paganism. And He sends a reluctant prophet to preach to them because His love is the kind that pursues. Jonah would have let them perish. God would not. “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10) The love of God drove the entire book. It drove the commission, the pursuit of the disobedient prophet, the fish, the preaching, and the repentance that followed.

David’s life tells the story from the other side. Jonah shows us God’s love pursuing the ignorant. David shows us God’s love restoring the guilty. “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:8–10) David wrote those words as a man who had committed adultery and murder, who had abused the power God gave him and destroyed the life of one of his most faithful servants. When Nathan confronted him, David’s response was immediate: “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan’s reply was equally immediate: “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” (2 Samuel 12:13)

The speed of the pardon is striking. David confesses and the forgiveness is already there, waiting for him. Because God’s mercy toward David was not a policy decision made in the moment. It was the expression of a love that preceded the sin, a love that had been set on David before David drew breath. When David cries out in Psalm 51, he appeals to exactly this: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot

out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”

(Psalm 51:1–2) He does not appeal to his own record. He does not appeal to his status as king.

He appeals to the character of God, specifically to God’s steadfast love, His *hesed*, the covenant love that binds God to His people. David knew that this love was the only ground he had to stand on, and it held.

Hosea gives us the same picture at the national level. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hosea 11:1) God loved Israel as a father loves a child. He taught them to walk, He healed them, He drew them with cords of kindness. And they turned away from Him to worship Baal. The expected response from any righteous judge would be destruction, and God says as much. But then comes the turn: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:8–9)

This is not reluctant mercy. God is not restraining Himself against His own inclination. His compassion grows warm. His heart recoils at the thought of giving Israel up. Charnock observes that God counts mercy as His wealth: riches of grace, riches of mercy, glorious riches of mercy. No other attribute is given that title in Scripture.² The God who spoke the world into existence, who holds the nations as a drop in a bucket, identifies His own treasure as mercy. His love for His people is not a concession wrung from a reluctant sovereign. It is the overflow of who He is. It drove the Exodus, sustained the wilderness, endured the rebellion, and sent the prophets. Every act of deliverance in Israel’s history was this love in motion.

²Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 440.

IV. What the Love of God Demands

Moses stood before Israel and gave them the foundational confession of the covenant people: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5) The Shema is the center of Israelite piety, recited twice daily, written on doorposts, bound on foreheads. It declares who God is and immediately demands a response. The response is love. Total love. Heart, soul, and might. The entire person oriented toward God with nothing held back.

When a scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest, Jesus quoted the Shema and then added something to it: “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29–31) Jesus does not replace the Shema. He completes it. The love that God demands from His people has always moved in two directions: upward toward God and outward toward the people around us. The vertical and the horizontal are inseparable. John makes this point with the force of a closed door: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:19–21)

The love of God for us creates an obligation that runs in both directions simultaneously. We love God because He first loved us. And the proof of that love is how we treat the people He has placed in our lives. This is why Jesus, in the same Upper Room where He gave the new

commandment, also said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Love for Christ produces obedience, and the first commandment Christ gives is to love one another. Obedience is not the opposite of love. Obedience is love in action. The Christian who loves God will find that love expressing itself in patience with a difficult spouse, in generosity toward someone who cannot repay, in prayer for a person who has done real harm. This is not natural. It runs against every instinct of self-preservation. It requires a love that we cannot manufacture on our own, which is exactly the point. We love because He first loved us, and the love He gives is sufficient for the demand He makes.

And the reach of that love extends past the people we find easy to care about. Jesus made that clear on the mount and again in the Upper Room. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Be merciful as your Father is merciful. The Christian’s love is not selective because God’s love was not selective in the sense that it pursued only the lovable. He set His covenant love upon a stiff-necked people. He sent His prophet to Nineveh. He died for His enemies. The love that came down from the Father to the Son and from the Son to us is meant to keep going. It does not terminate in the one who receives it. It flows through the believer and into the world.

Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) The world cannot see the eternal love of the Father for the Son. It cannot see the decree of redemption or the covenant of grace. But it can see Christians loving each other and loving their neighbors and loving their enemies. John says, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12) Perfected does not mean made flawless. It means brought to its intended end. The love of God reaches its appointed destination when it flows through the people of God into the world. That is what it was always for. The Father loved the Son. The Son loved His people. His people love one

another and the world around them. The love that existed before the foundation of the world arrives, finally, at the neighbor's door.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Deuteronomy 6:4–5