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# Undeserved Love

**"God demonstrated His love for us in this:**

**While we were still enemies, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8**

**Why Does God Love Us? Do We Really Deserve It?- Jack Wellman (pages 1-4)**

**A Profound Reason to Love that Difficult Person in Your Life – Rick Thomas (pages 5-10)**

**Loving Your Dangerous Neighbor – Timothy Padgett (pages 11-14)**

**Why Should We Love Our Enemies – Aaron Wellmann (pages 15-17)**

**10 Reasons Why We Must Love Unlovable Church Members – Chuck Lawless (pages 18-20)**



## WHY DOES GOD LOVE US? DO WE REALLY DESERVE IT?

JACK WELLMAN



**Does God really love us? Are we deserving of His love? Why Does God Love Us?**

***We are the apple of His eye, He rejoices over us***

### **DOES GOD REALLY LOVE US?**

The Bible is full of Scriptures where God declares His love for us. One of the most famous of all is **John 3:16** where it says,

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

What other Scriptures declare that God truly loves us in an undeserved and unconditional way?

**Zechariah 2:8b** *"for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye."*

**Zephaniah 3:17** *"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."*

**Jeremiah 32:41** *"I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."*

**Psalms 103:4** *"who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion."*

**Psalms 103:8** *"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."*

**Psalms 103:13** *"As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him."*

**Psalms 103:17** *"But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children."*

Just imagine what the Word of God says about those who belong to Him. What tender love is revealed in His words? We are the apple of His eye, He rejoices over us, He sings over us, He abounds in love over us, He has the compassion of a Father over us, He delights over us...and this love is from everlasting to everlasting.

What more solid proof can there be? God cannot lie and God tells us in dozens of Scriptures that He loves those whom he calls His own.

### **ARE WE DESERVING OF HIS LOVE?**

This is an easy one to answer. No, we are not deserving of His love. We are not worthy to be loved by Him. We are most unlovable. Even so,

*"God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were still enemies, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8*

During Jesus sacrifice at Calvary:

- Peter denied Him
- the Jews Crucified Him
- Judas betrayed Him
- the Council illegally tried Him
- Pontius Pilate unjustly condemned Him.

What did Jesus do? He said,

*"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34*

When we were at our worst, Jesus was at His best. When we least deserved grace, His grace was the absolute most. While we had nothing to show Him to give us mercy, He took our nothing to show His mercy for us.

God gives us what we least deserve (called grace) and withholds what we do deserve (called mercy).

We should be careful to ask God for justice because if He truly gave us justice, no one could stand. If we think God should give us what we deserve, we would all utterly perish. Jesus Christ got what He did not deserve so we could receive what we do not deserve. This is what isn't fair: that we did not get what we deserved, while He got what He did not deserve. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that life is fair. If it was fair, then Jesus would not have died. He was completely innocent and without sin....yet we were completely guilty and sinners. Because it wasn't fair to Jesus, we can be declared righteous by His atoning work on the cross.

The conclusion is that, no, we are not deserving, but our children make mistakes. They disobey but we love them nonetheless. Our love is not conditioned on their behavior. We may not like their behavior at times but we love our children and it is not a love that is conditional. In a much greater way, God loves us despite our despicable, sinful nature. That is love that is unconditional – not conditioned – even with our willful disobedience.

### **WHY DOES GOD LOVE US?**

We began with John 3:16 in answering the question of whether God really loves us. We can also know for sure that He does by this same verse. Imagine that you had only one child. You knew that you would have to have your son or daughter die to ensure that others would live. These other people would treat your only child in an unusually cruel manner. They would torture them, spit on them, pull their hair out, beat them, whip them, scorn them, ridicule them, laugh at them, drive nails through their hands and feet, and let them die by an illegal trial, testified by false witnesses, and be completely innocent of ever having done anything at all. Then you can only imagine – slightly – what the Father had to endure.

We know that Jesus suffered the most agonizing death of any human that has ever lived (historically speaking this is a fact). **We think of what Jesus went through but do we ever think of what this must have felt like to the Righteous Father in Heaven?** The Father sacrificed so very much too. When Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, it surely was because He had the knowledge that all the sins of humanity; past, present, and future, would be borne by Him. But there was also the agony knowing about the coming separation from the Father Whom He loved intensely. This is why Jesus cried out at Calvary,

*“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”* **Mark 15:34**

This was the first and only time that Jesus had been separated from the Father. The Father had to look away because God is so holy that He cannot even look at sin, and at that moment, Jesus was the sin offering for fallen humanity.

Jesus loves the Father and the Father loves Jesus but here is the love that God has for us. In **John 17:26**, Christ says that

*“The love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

Further, as Jesus prayed to the Father He acknowledged that

*“You loved them even as you loved me.”* **John 17:23**

Let those last two verses soak into your mind and meditate on them. The Father loved them – and all believers Whom He chooses – just as the Father loved Jesus. That means you if you are born-again by the Holy Spirit’s work. God the Father loves *us* as much as He loves Jesus. Knowing that Jesus and the Father are one, this means that Jesus also loves *us* as much as He loves the Father. That may seem controversial but that is what **John 17:23** and **17:26** says.

Read those Scriptures in almost any translation and that is what the original meaning is. The words used for “even as” and “with which” means equal too. That is how we can know for sure that God loves us. Not only that, it shows just how *much* He loves us. Why? Why does God love the unlovable? That is something that you will have to ask Him someday in eternity. I have no answer to that. It is enough to know that He *does* love us – with an everlasting love equal to that between the Father and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Wow.

## TESTIMONIAL

### THE UNFAILING LOVE OF GOD IS FOR YOU TOO!

By Marielle Sta. Ana

Heavenly Father, I never imagined 5 years ago that my life will be so meaningful and colorful with you. It was a roller coaster ride of emotions. But it all led me to trust you and be amazed at your love, even more!

It's been a while since I last posted about Him. I failed the One who loved me selflessly. Big time. That was the worst thing I've ever done. A lot of times I asked myself if my love was ever enough because of what went wrong. (It took me months to forgive myself!!).

I was so devastated that I didn't think that He still had a wonderful plan for my life. He must be mad at me and disgusted because I intentionally hurt Him again. I couldn't even cry, nor say a word because of mixed emotions. How could I hurt someone who's been there with me through ups and down? How could these feelings of shame be so heavy? But, my prideful and stubborn heart led me to hide from Him because I never consider myself as "qualified" anymore.

"He is mad at me. He will never love me because I hurt him. I don't deserve to be forgiven." —that was my mindset before.

That was what I THOUGHT some people wanted me to realize. I was too hard on myself. I kept on punishing myself for an incident I can never undo. For me, I was a hopeless case. But the "only hope" I was trying to give up on, won't give up on me. He never gets tired wiping my tears during my sleepless nights.

His grace found me again, slowly but surely, He healed me. I was redeemed by His words day by day. It was refreshing to think that there's no past too dirty for God to restore. From the beginning He knew I will fail Him. But still He chose me to be His vessel and to be a living proof that the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't worthless.

And today, as I celebrate 5 years of intimate relationship with the Lord, I am proud to say that I live for Him because He died for me. I serve a God who graciously saved my spirit, a God of unlimited chances and a God who never gets tired seeing potential in me. He is my safest place. I now understand what makes the love of God amazing and unconditional:

- It is even though I am undeserving, He would still search for me and win my heart over and over again.
- It is when some people already gave up on me, there is a God who will never, ever let go of me!

A God who will say straight to my face,

*"My child, I love you. And no sin that you will confess to Me could ever make Me love you less. I'm here for you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Just come back to Me."*



#### MY PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF RECEIVING/EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE...

((Your background, conversion/change experience, and life with Christ))

# A PROFOUND REASON TO LOVE THAT DIFFICULT PERSON IN YOUR LIFE

**Rick Thomas**

The heart of the gospel is about loving difficult people. Showing us how to love the unlovable is the point and purpose of the Bible.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, who died for undeserving people, is the primary example that teaches us this truth,

*“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children.” **Ephesians 5:1***

Jesus does not ask us to do things He is unwilling to do. We have a tested and sympathetic Savior,

*“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” **Hebrews 4:15***

Christ is the reason we should not shirk our biblical responsibility to pursue those who rub us the wrong way.

Paul, a direct disciple of the Savior, gave us his thoughts about interacting with people who do not meet our expectations:

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **Romans 12:14-18***

He did not make this up or pull this idea out of thin air. He was inspired by God to write those words. Loving difficult people is the way of the Lord. Peter, another disciple of Christ, gives us a similar, but more acute thought about how to respond to difficult people.

*For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ...if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. **1 Peter 2:19-20***

Then he backs it up with the example of Jesus. Peter had firsthand knowledge of how Christ dealt with sinful people. The evidence is overwhelming and should have a humbling effect on our souls.

*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. **1 Peter 2:23***

## WHO ARE YOU?

Let’s make this personal. Think about an annoying person in your life—someone who gets under your skin.

- What are your thoughts about them?
- How do you associate with them?
- Would you rather avoid them or pursue them?

Your answer will test your understanding of and faithfulness to the gospel—the redemptive work of Christ. God is a relentless pursuer whose goal for us goes beyond salvation. He wants us transformed into the likeness of His Son.

- Perhaps you have a spouse who challenges every fiber of your being when it comes to loving like Jesus.
- Maybe one of your children has disappointed you one too many times; you have weak resistance, and your desire for redemptive parenting has waned.
- What about that church member who tempts you to sin just by looking at them?
- How about your extended family member?
- What about people or people groups in your culture? Gays? Abortionists? Democrats? Republicans?
- What about lazy people? Obese people? How about women drivers?

You could probably clump all of your annoying people into one broad category: *people who do not do things your way*. Wouldn't that be true? How many people in your life agree with you, but you disagree with them? That is rare.

Typically, the people who annoy us the most are those who do things differently from us. Regardless of who they are or what they do, God's call on us is the same: He wants us to partner with Him to carry the gospel to them.

### **I AM JONAH**

*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. **Jonah 1:1-3***

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah was God's call for him to go to a people group who were not like him and to tell them about the Lord. Their primary differences were their ethnicity and their religion: they were Ninevites.

Jonah's problem would be similar to asking an American Christian to go to an Afghanistan Muslim to tell him about Jesus. When Jonah received a call like this, he responded by running in the opposite direction from where God was calling him. He went to Tarshish, which is like being in Columbus, OH, called to New York City, but choosing to run to Seattle, WA. Rather than going 500 miles northeast to Nineveh, he decided to go 2300 miles west, in the opposite direction. It is difficult for me to be hard on Jonah because I act similarly to him. Though God has not called me to go to an uncomfortable culture, He has called me to interact with uncomfortable people.

How about you?

The individual that the Spirit of God has brought to your mind is more than likely your disappointing person. It's that annoying person in your life that you would rather avoid than to respond to redemptively.

### **I AM A RUNNER**

Jonah physically ran from the Lord, which is something you probably have not done. But I suspect, if you are like me, you have run from the Lord in your mind. You do this by pretending the problems between you and another person are not a big deal, or that the person or the problem does not exist. Minimally, you are a mental runner—a person who avoids difficult contexts or potential conflicts. Our culture calls it fight or flight. I do not like this terminology because it is devoid of the gospel. It would be better to say redeem or run.

The solution is not to pick a fight or run from the situation, but to seek to redeem an individual or a relationship—an act that would put God on display. If Jonah had decided to redeem rather than run, he would have experienced great things with God.

***Trying to run from the presence of God is as futile as trying to shovel smoke with a rake. – Anonymous***

Though you may not be excited about entering into a potential redemptive opportunity, God is. He will not only be with you; He will help you succeed at what He has called you to do,

*“...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” **Philippians 1:6***

The type of “mental running” that we do happens because we forget that we are living in the presence of God, which is a serious doctrinal mistake because our omnipresent Lord is everywhere.

*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? **Psalms 139:7***

### **I AM A PRETENDER**

*And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. **Hebrews 4:13***

Imagine if your theology were better than Jonah’s. Imagine if you were more aware of who the Lord is and how He works.

- How would this change the way you interact with others?
- How would this change how you think about others?

You cannot run from God, physically or mentally. He is there. He is always there, persuading, appealing, wooing, and searching. At that moment, none of this mattered to Jonah. He acted as though he had theological amnesia.

Minimally, his theology was not driving his actions. His sinful biases and preferences were motivating him to run from God’s clear call on his life. Doesn’t this raise the question?

- What is God calling you to do?
- What message from the Lord is clear to you, but you are either physically or mentally running?
- How would a daily awareness of, and sensitivity to, God’s Spirit living in you animate your thought life and compel you to walk with Him—to change you?

If you were keeping in step with the Spirit, rather than running from the Spirit’s illuminations as He engages you by the Word, what would be different about your thinking? Your life?

- How would it impact the fantasies that tempt your mind?
- How would it impact a decision you know you should make?
- What area of your marriage is God calling you to change?
- What is He asking you to do differently with your family?
- Is there a business decision you should make, but are avoiding?
- How should you engage your neighbors differently?

- Is God calling you to better financial practices?
- What would be different about living in community with others?
- What about your angry or frustrated thoughts regarding God?
- Are there secret places in your mind known only to you and God?

Do you live with a constant awareness that God is in all places and has complete knowledge of all things, including the thoughts and intentions of your heart? If Jonah did know this, no doubt he was pretending it was not true. He acted as though God did not exist. You can do this too. I most certainly have done this. I have been a pretender. The foolishness of pretending does not change the truth that God is always there, and He is a relentless pursuer.

### **GOD IS A PURSUER**

Jonah knew God was a relentless pursuer, which was part of the problem. He knew God might bless the Ninevites if he cooperated with Him. We learn this through Jonah's painful but honest confession in the last chapter.

And he prayed to the LORD and said,

*"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***

Jonah's problem was far more profound than just running. He had hatred in his heart toward the people God was pursuing to redeem. But it gets worse. Jonah was criticizing God for being God. Jonah was doing all he could to withhold the grace of God from the Ninevites. He knew if he relented and did it God's way, the Ninevites might be saved, which was not acceptable. Rather than doing what God told him to do, he ran. His response was a profound act of a man who is a prophet of God—a Christian. It is sobering for us to take note of it and to examine our thoughts and motives.

- Is there someone or some people group in your life you hope would receive God's judgment than His forgiveness?
- Is there someone you would withhold God's grace from than extend God's grace to them?

Maybe the problem is not about differences in personal preferences; perhaps the person you are thinking of has harmed you. The question would be similar: though they have done wrong,

- Do you long to see the efficacious grace of God operating in their lives?
- Are you praying, hoping, and seeking ways in which you can be a messenger of this blessing?

### **I WANT THE HEART OF GOD**

The irony in this story is that it was God's child who was trying to run the furthest from God. All too often this is the case. Religious people can be some of the most deceptive people. How easy it is to hide under the shroud of religion while having a heart that actively works against God. This "religious game" is our temptation. We can create a wide gap between who we profess to be and the life we have.

Jonah had a gap in his life that God revealed and then the Lord called him to respond redemptively. A person that God requests to do a hard thing may be tempted to run rather than pursue redemptive possibilities.

Jonah ran because he did not have the heart of God. The Lord wanted to expose Jonah's heart. He desired to wake His prophet up and turn him around. He had pockets of un-discernible disobedience, which could only be exposed when he was challenged to respond to God. In this sense, he was no different from the Ninevites.

- The Ninevites were living in sin. So was Jonah.
- The Ninevites needed to be exposed. So did Jonah.
- The Ninevites needed to be redeemed. So did Jonah.
- The Ninevites needed someone to call them out. So did Jonah.

When you refuse to respond to the call of God to help another person, there are two people in need of help—you and the person God is asking you to help. The book of Jonah is not about the Ninevites. It is about God and His relationship with His prophet. The remainder of this book will demonstrate that God is a relentless Redeemer and the lengths He will go to help His children. If Jonah's temptation is tempting you today, you are only a prayer away from God's lavish grace.

God's call on your life requires change because He wants to save you from yourself. He is not trying to ruin your life by asking you to act redemptively toward others. He knows the more redemptive you are, the more you will have a heart like Him. If you are a runner, you can choose to stop, turn around, and run back to God. We call this biblical repentance.

You can run boldly to the throne of grace, asking the Father for a fresh work of His grace in your life. Stop pursuing your hidden idolatries. Turn to Him in the act of faith, and you will experience the redemptive activity He wants you to lavish on others.

*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. **Hebrews 4:16***

## **CALL TO ACTION**

I have asked you many questions throughout this chapter. Go back through them with a friend while asking God to reveal any hidden anger you may have toward someone. Perhaps you're working with someone who struggles with a difficult person in their life. Use this chapter to help them see what may be unclear to them at this moment.

## **TESTIMONIAL**

### **DOES GOD WANT YOU TO SPEND TIME WITH PEOPLE WHO ALWAYS HURT YOU?**

April Motl

I grew up on old movies and classic sitcoms. Summer mornings always included a dose of I Love Lucy and The Andy Griffith Show. Now, when the need to take a lazy break pulls at me until I can't stand up any more, rather reluctantly I succumb to the TV thing. Me and my tiny man-child plop down for a shared re-run of Andy Griffith. As I started re-watching the series as an adult, I realized how much watching these TV shows seep into our worldview as kids. Andy Taylor is known for being the "sheriff without a gun" because he says most folks are good and sensible enough that if you just have a nice chat, most things can be worked out. I love that idea. I wish the world worked that way outside the little box in my living room. I wish the powers that be could sit down to a game of Scrabble and work out the problems all over the globe. And I have wished, prayed, worked, sweated, cried, prayed more, and tried for relationships in my life to work that way too. I want every issue to be talk-out-able. I want every relationship in my life to brim over with warm fuzzies. But in God's gracious wisdom, He delineates (for those of us who keep trying to make the world our Mayberry) a

series of cautionary red flags for our relationships so we can know who to let into that precious little main street of our heart and who doesn't belong there.

Some years back, I kept returning to the Lord with a broken heart over a relationship that I felt was supposed to work, but just didn't. I prayed so much over this dearly loved person. I believed that if I gave 100 percent to the relationship, it would be 50 percent better until it grew to become a truly healthy, God-honoring relationship. I went on like this for years. Eventually, totally worn out, I asked God why He kept allowing this relationship to hurt me so much. I felt the Holy Spirit press the same question into my heart, "Why are you allowing this relationship to hurt you so much?" Then in my devotional reading, I noticed a few Proverbs say things like "do not associate with" XYZ person. I did a quick word search through Scripture to find a number of red flags God gives His children to follow in the relationship department. I wasn't in a covenant relationship with this person (marriage), yet I was absolutely bound to them despite the clear direction of Scripture not to align my heart with them.

As I struggled with this relationship and how to walk in God's truth and grace in the midst of it, I confided to one of my Christian friends how discouraged I was over my inability to follow what I thought Scripture was instructing me; that I should be content with insults (2 Corinthians 12:10), and that suffering well finds favor with God (1 Peter 2:20), so I felt I should be able to just live in this pain and do it well. She pointed out that when we go the extra mile for someone or suffer those insults, it's generally for the purpose of our witness. But this person was a professing believer and my actions weren't witnessing. Even when I spoke about the pain I felt, and tried to confront their inappropriate behavior, I was simply told that "love covers all sin" and clearly, I didn't have enough love. So I felt guilty for hurting and ashamed that I couldn't figure out how to be healthy in this relationship. Eventually I felt the Lord impress on my heart "You are not your own, you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19). You are choosing not to obey by being in this relationship. It's not a matter of you being mean or nice. It's a matter of you choosing to obey Me, the One who paid the price for your heart."

I reread that list of red-flag Scriptures and prayed about how to follow through with love and grace. Everyone needs grace. Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes, we allow ourselves to endure unnecessary wounding in relationships because we figure it's our duty or because it brings us to a place of humility that honors Christ. While there are a plethora of verses that instruct us to take up our cross and follow Christ (Mark 8:34), there's much needed discernment in applying godly wisdom to our relationships as well. In light of these verses, I've had to realign some relationships. People I dearly loved but had violent tempers did indeed create sticky snares in my life that God wasn't calling me to be part of. I also learned to give less of my heart to people addicted to gossip and slander. In each circumstance where I had to limit the influence that person had in my heart, the individual was a professing believer. They were not open to any correction and did not change that facet of life (or got worse) over the course of years. None of my realigned relationships lost my love, forgiveness, or prayers. They were simply redirected off the main street of my heart. If we truly believe that we are not our own, then regardless of how much we might love a person caught in such activities, we must realign our interaction with them because our Lord tells us to.

When we consider how we are not our own, we must also recognize that sometimes offenses will come our way and they too have been sifted through our Father's hand. Because we don't own the rights to our hearts anymore, our Father instructs us to forgive. He allows us to choose whether we will cling to grudges or grace. But in the end, if we are really following Him, the choice has already been made.

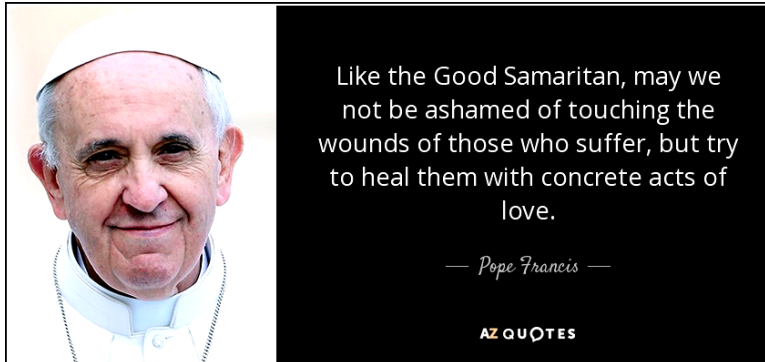


**MY PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF LOVING THE DIFFICULT TO LOVE...**  
(The presenting challenge, initial thoughts/feelings, actual response, and current situation)

# LOVING YOUR DANGEROUS NEIGHBOR

## The Radical Implications of Jesus' Call to Love Our Neighbors

Timothy D Padgett



*And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live. But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" **Luke 10:25-29***

Christians of all stripes give their hearty assent to Christ's call to love our neighbors; we're rather less united when it comes to putting that love into practice. At least we think we're disunited.

Very different Christians make the very same mistake in very different ways when trying to follow Christ's command.

- Progressives cry that the church must provide for the downtrodden because they deserve it and care for the outcast because they've been oppressed.
- Traditionalists counter that we must be cautious not to endanger ourselves or to enable the immoral in their sin. Both assume that the worthiness of the recipient determines the appropriateness of our love.

Christ's call to love our neighbor puts the lie to both of these errors. God's love for us show us that we ought to act in love to all, regardless of whether we think they deserve it or not. For many people, both Christian and non-Christian, Jesus' call to "*Love your neighbor*" is the essence of Christianity. Combined with His call not to judge others, this is for many the shorthand version of Christian ethics. As straightforward as this seems, there is a problem. When narrowed down to a catchphrase, the simplistic call to "Love your Neighbor," can yield something which is not un-Christian but is, in a way, sub-Christian.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are far worse places to root your morality than this. But, while Christ's words clearly govern our behavior towards all people in a self-giving and self-denying love, many reduce this neighbor love to mere sentiment and strip away its radical nature. There's just nothing particularly Christian about loving nice people. Anyone can love nice people. Loving them is a piece of cake. Loving difficult people is, well, difficult. The love which Christ calls us to exhibit is not just the love for nice people, for easy people,

for non-threatening people of whom you are not afraid. No, Jesus calls us to love the hostile, difficult, and genuinely dangerous people in our lives.

When we read the account of the **Good Samaritan**, we see God calling us to an uncomfortable love, a love that is not supposed make us feel good about ourselves, a love that doesn't deny the troubles of loving others. Instead, it calls on us to love others with the same gloriously undeserved love which God has shown to us. This tale is one of those stories like Noah's Ark and Jonah and the Whale which is well-known enough that it has passed into the popular imagination. People with absolutely no understanding or even respect for Christianity will readily refer to so-and-so being a Good Samaritan. Some local and state governments have enacted what they call Good Samaritan laws which govern the way we are to act when we encounter people in emergency situations.

Now, any child in Sunday School knows that Jews and Samaritans did not get along. We don't normally get much beyond that, but we need to remember that this animosity was no small thing. These two groups hated each other's guts, and they had been hating each other for centuries. Certainly, ethnic strife played its role, but there was more going on that hatred for the "other." They'd each given just cause to see the other not just as different but as an outright enemy. During the latter part of the Old Testament and in the Greco-Roman period which followed, Jews attacked Samaritans and Samaritans attacked Jews. These neighboring nations did not like one another and regularly offered reasons for this hatred to endure. This was no fear of the unknown; this was a pathos against the all too well known.

*When Jesus is calling on you to love your neighbor, He is saying for you to love **this** neighbor. This neighbor you hate...this neighbor you fear. That guy. Love him. We can miss **the radical nature of this love** when our focus centers on the supposed virtue of the neighbor as the reason for loving him. For some of us the temptation is to ask for confirmation of the neighbor's goodness before we will grant him our love.*

- Will the person misuse our generosity?
- Will my kindness only serve to inflate an already enlarged ego?

We ask, is this a safe person? Is this someone who will harm me? These are fair questions, but this story doesn't let us let that be the deciding factor. Was the man left injured on the road a safe man? A good man? We don't know, but we are told through the Samaritan's example to love such people regardless of their righteousness. **Our love for our neighbors is not to wait upon their moral improvement before this love can be shown.**

Another way we miss this is somewhat more dangerous because it is more subtle. We sometimes misunderstand Christ's words here, at least in practice, because we assume the goodness of those we love. We are so convinced to care for the needy, to care for our victimized neighbors, that we tell ourselves that these neighbors are good. We tell ourselves and others that the homeless man begging for money is the victim of a heartless socio-economic system, not an alcoholic who is abusing the system, that the young man fleeing from the war torn Middle East or Latin America is just looking for a way to live his life in peace, not someone who could turn the wealth and freedom of the West against it. Would that it were always so! Loving people like this is easy. Loving people like this is loving lovable people, likable people. But God calls us to more.

Again, ask yourself, was the man left on the road a good man? A worthy man? A lovable man? We don't know. We do know that he was an enemy to the Samaritan. Did the Samaritan help him because he wasn't afraid or

believed in his heart that victims couldn't also be villains? No. **He helped this man, this enemy, without knowing whether he deserved it.**

Christ is saying that to love your neighbor as yourself, to follow the law of God, means that you will give this love to the people around you in need even if you are afraid, even if you think they might be unrighteous, even if you **know** them to be an enemy. **This is radical love.** This is **Christian love.** This is a love given by those who are unworthy to those who are unworthy on account of the One who is worthy of all. We aren't to love our neighbors because *we're* that good. We aren't to love our neighbors because *they're* that good. **We are to love our neighbors because God is that good.**

If it's about you, then you only have to love so far as to feel good about yourself and when you feel you are not in any danger. Likewise, if it is about your neighbor, then you only have to love them if they deserve it and if they pose no threat to anyone. Loving others for ourselves leaves us free to hate anyone inconvenient. Anyone can do that. Loving others for themselves leaves us free to judge the worth of others. Anyone can do that. Having a biblical, 'theocentric' love of neighbor frees us from either temptation. It isn't about our glory or their goodness, but about glorifying the One who is goodness epitomized.

Think of it like this. What are the two primary images God uses in the Bible to describe His relationship to his people? Yes, He uses religious imagery like congregations and political imagery like kingdoms, but most often it's the imagery of marriage and children. Part of being married and having kids is glorious. The way you can be in a crowd of people yet know that there is that one special someone who is yours and whose you are. The simple joy in seeing letters come in for Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so. The way your child's eyes light up as you swing her around. That is a joy that puts any night out at a bar to shame. Yet not all of marriage and child-rearing is so glamorous. There's the time your wife is sick, and you are stuck handling your own household duties and hers. There are the times when your child is producing things from his body which make you want to vomit yourself. This is how God describes His love for His people, and this is the love He calls us to have for others.

This is God's love, the love of a husband for his bride in sickness and health, the love of a mother for her child, in all its precious incompetence. This is the love of the Good Samaritan. This is the love we are to have for our neighbors. When faced with the difficulty of loving our neighbor, whether that neighbor is the enemy at the gates or the family member in your home, let the love which God has had for you spill out from you onto this undeserving person. As we have been loved by God, let us love our neighbors for God.

## TESTIMONIAL

### GIRL FORGIVES MAN WHO LEFT HER PARALYZED

By Daniel Aven

Kai Leigh Harriott has a miraculous spirit. Four years ago, at the age of 3, she was shot in the back and paralyzed from the waist down. But she refuses to be angry. On Monday's ***The Early Show***, national correspondent **Tracy Smith** reported on Kai and her family's unparalleled ability to forgive. On the night of Kai's tragic injury, she was playing on her porch in Dorchester, Mass., with her sister, Aja. A man named Anthony Warren got into an argument in the street and fired three gunshots into the air.

Aja tried to protect her sister, but, when she brought Kai into the house, she noticed a pool of blood. A bullet had shattered Kai's spine, sparing her life, but taking away her ability to walk. While Kai spent four months in a

rehabilitation center after being shot, her mother Tonya, acclimated herself to seeing her daughter in a wheelchair. "It was so good to see her sitting up (in a wheelchair) and she looked so pretty, she was so little, but I got so sick I couldn't look at her," Tonya said.

Three years following Kai's incident, a trial date was scheduled for Warren. Kai, who was 5 at the time, volunteered to attend the trial. In an emotional moment, Kai took the stand and spoke directly to her shooter.

"Anthony Warren, what you did was wrong, but I still forgive you," she said.

Kai's courageous stand moved the court, as well as Warren. Her words influenced him to change his not guilty plea to guilty, and he accepted his punishment.

In another moving moment in court, Warren, sentenced to 13 to 15 years in prison, reached out to shake Tonya's hand as he was being led out of the courtroom. Tonya said,

"He apologized and his words will never come out of my heart because it wasn't a sentence that meant vindication. It was his apology."

Tonya said that she hugged him and told him that God had given him a second chance and that he should take advantage of it. Tonya can't explain it, but she's never felt malice towards Warren.

"I've never had anger," she said. "I don't know why I was given this cup to drink, but I never had anger for him."

Kai stressed how important it has been to her to forgive Warren. She hopes that other children like her can be just as forgiving. She said,

"It's kind of hard (to forgive), but, as soon as you do it, it's not that hard anymore."

Doctors say that Kai will never walk again, but Tonya believes that God will heal her daughter someday. Kai also dreams of standing up on her own in the future.



### **MY PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF LOVING MY DANGEROUS NEIGHBOR...**

(Conflict, climax/highlight, and resolution/decision)

# WHY SHOULD WE LOVE OUR ENEMIES?

Aaron Wellmann

As Christians, our highest calling is to love. God calls us to love Him above all else and love our neighbors as ourselves. Many people think that when the Bible says “love your neighbor” it means we are supposed to love our family, friends, acquaintances, and maybe a few strangers along the way. However, the call to love stretches far beyond our inner circle. We are not exempt from loving anyone, not even our enemies.

- How can God insist that we love our co-worker who has been spreading rumors about us, or our mother-in-law who we can never seem to be good enough for?
- How can we be expected to love those people who are so unloving to us?

In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches us that we are to love even our enemies.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” **Matthew 5:43-45***

It’s clear that Jesus calls us to be counter-cultural by loving our enemies, but *why should we?*

## **WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD.**

We should love our enemies because God commands and anything God commands us to do is for our benefit. More than that, we should love our enemies because it is one of the trademarks of being a son or daughter of God. Recall the words of Jesus in **Matthew 5:44-45**,

*“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.**”*

As children of God, loving our neighbors isn’t optional, God expects us to love our enemies if we call ourselves His children. We should strive to produce the fruit of showing love to our enemies. If we deliberately ignore God’s command to love our enemies, we are in dire need of a spiritual self-evaluation.

## **WE SIN AGAINST GOD.**

*“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” **Matthew 25:40***

All humankind is created in the image of God. Therefore, we can’t separate our love for God from our love for humankind. By loving our enemies we show love to God. Likewise, when we despise our enemies we also despise God because He made everyone in His image, even our enemies. King David illustrates this fact beautifully in Psalm 51:4 after committing adultery with Bathsheba he cries out,

*“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” **Psalms 51:4***

David got it. He understood that by sinning against Bathsheba, he also transgressed against his heavenly Father and it rocked him to the core. The sin of David is different than the sin of failing to love our enemies but the same concept applies. When we sin against our neighbor, enemy or not, we sin against God.

### **NO EXCUSES.**

We have no excuse *not* to love our enemy. Often, when we read passages of scripture that command us to love our enemies we come up with a ton of excuses to absolve us of our responsibility. We think that if we don't feel loved by someone then we don't have to show love to them. This lie couldn't be farther from the truth.

We have no excuse *not* to love everyone, including those who grind our gears, or even those who persecute us. We have no excuse because any level of love that God calls us to display to another human being, has already been extended to us by God more deeply than we can hope to understand.

God loved us first before we even knew who he was. He didn't wait for us to start loving him, he took the initiative. Paul, in Romans 5:10 explains the depth of God's love for us before we even knew him,

*"While we were enemies of God, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His son." Romans 5:10*

While we were still enemies of God, out of His love for us, He sent His Son to die on the cross and reconcile us to Himself. Therefore, if we are to be like Christ as the Bible commands us, we can't twiddle our thumbs, waiting for our enemies to love us, we have to love them first, because that's exactly what God did for us. **God has extended this undeserved love to us and expects us to do the same to our enemies.**

### **A WONDERFUL WITNESS**

Taking vengeance on those who wrong us is glorified in our culture. We are taught to hate those who hate us. As Christians, loving our enemies, serves as one of the most powerful witnessing tools. ***God calls us to be salt and light, to stand out in the crowd.*** What better way to do so then to do something so utterly unheard-of and counter-cultural like loving our enemies? Displaying this Christ-like love in today's hate-filled world will force people to take notice and wonder who or what could compel us to love our enemies.

### **IT'S NOT AN EASY ROAD.**

Simply knowing *why* we should love your enemies doesn't mean it's easy to accomplish. It can seem impossible to overcome your feelings of animosity that harden your heart. However, it is possible with God.

- Admit to God that you struggle to love your enemies, he already knows anyway.
- Take the first step and admit your weakness and ask God to help you understand how to love your enemies and ask him to fulfill the call in your heart.
- Next time you're faced with the choice to love your enemy, ask yourself what you would say or do if that person was your best friend in the whole world and do it.

Even though every fiber of your being tells you to hate your enemy, if you respond to them like you would respond to someone you love, amazing transformation can take place.

***"The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend." Abraham Lincoln.***

## TESTIMONIAL

### CHARLESTON VICTIMS WIELD POWER OF FORGIVENESS: COLUMN

John S. Dickerson

*"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

Did you see the families of the shooting victims in Charleston, S.C., confront the accused killer at his bond hearing Friday? Did you see the video — them pleading with Dylann Roof through tears? They said they forgave him — the very soul who, days earlier police said, held the weight of the gun, pulled the trigger and, having seen the mess of blood spurting from one writhing victim, continued to another. And another. And another. Until nine lay dead on the seats and the floor of a Christian house of worship.

The shooter did not slow to notice; their blood was the same color as his. And did you see? One after another, the relatives of the slain, begging Roof to turn to God. One after another, they prayed for his soul. One after another, they forgave him. It was neither expected nor explicable, that forgiveness. Such forgiveness is unseen in the animal world, is illogical in the rational world, is nonsensical to common human nature. Such forgiveness is humanity at its most human, or perhaps it is most divine.

Like the Boston bomber, the Charleston suspect stood unmoved by the words of mourning survivors, his eyes veiled by the evil of hatred. We have witnessed concentrated, unthinkable evil — met by concentrated, undeserved forgiveness.

In a world where evil can seem unstoppable, these families from Charleston have demonstrated that there is still hope. Hope not only in the good fight against racism, prejudice and evil, but hope also in the good that overwhelms evil. Good sometimes overcomes evil via counterintuitive forces: compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

The forgiveness from Charleston does not deny that our society desperately needs reform. The forgiveness from Charleston does not deny the justice that must follow acts of racism and hatred. Charleston survivors pleaded with Roof to "repent." Alana Simmons, whose grandfather was killed, said, "Everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love, and their legacies live in love."

The words of so many from Emanuel AME, echo another famous forgiveness. Two thousand years ago, a man uttered these words, even as he was being crucified:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

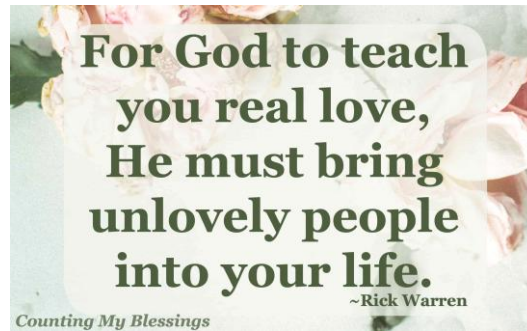


#### MY PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF LOVING MY ENEMIES...

(The presenting challenge, initial thoughts/feelings, actual response, and current situation)

# 10 REASONS WHY WE MUST LOVE UNLOVABLE CHURCH MEMBERS

Chuck Lawless



I was a young pastor, and I was sure everybody in the church was kind, gracious, and Christian. Everybody would treat everybody else with the love of God. Needless to say, it didn't take me long to learn that even in the church are people who don't quite get there. Some people are really hard to love.

At the same time, I couldn't avoid Jesus' telling us to love God and neighbor,

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* **Matthew 22:34-40**

Nor could I run from New Testaments commands that we love one another,

*Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.* **1 Thessalonians 4:9**

*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.* **1 Peter 1:22**

*And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.* **1 John 3:23**

I would be lying to say I never struggle now, but I've learned something about loving others. Here are ten reasons why we must love even unlovable church members.

**1. GOD LOVES THEM.** I take these words literally: "For God loved *the world* in this way. . . ." (John 3:16). He loves the arrogant church member, the person caught in sin, and the follower who denies Him. That's the point: *He who loves all of us with an amazing love expects us to love others similarly.*

**2. WE SHOW THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL BY LOVING ALL PEOPLE.** Jesus said our love for one another would be one way to show the world His love,

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35*

The church is indeed a miracle – people from varied backgrounds and different races, all loving each other as a family brought together by the blood of Jesus. *Being family means we must love even those who occasionally drive the family crazy.*

**3. WE LIVE IN CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE WHEN WE SHOW LOVE TOWARD ALL.** Christian love, while not being devoid of emotion, is an active love, a *doing* love – evidenced by how we act toward others. Our faith does not allow us to say, "Because I just don't love you any more, we can no longer be in relationship." Rather, *Christian love means we act as a Christian toward all people, even when our feelings aren't there.*

**4. SOME UNLOVABLE CHURCH MEMBERS NEED JESUS.** Let's face it: Jesus had a fake in His followers, and we're not going to do better than He did. Among a church family are likely to be those who believe they're Christian, but who never truly repented and believed. They sometimes act as non-believers act . . . *because that's who they are. They need to see genuine Christian love so they might recognize their need for Christ.*

**5. SOME UNLOVABLE CHURCH MEMBERS ARE UNDISCIPLINED BELIEVERS ACTING LIKE UNDISCIPLINED PEOPLE.** Some believers have never been taught. Their churches led them to the Lord and baptized them, but they often did not pour themselves into these believers. Consequently, some church members are still babies in Christ, despite their years in the church. *They need someone to help them see how much they need to grow – but it needs to be someone who truly loves them.*

**6. LOVE MOTIVATES OUR PRAYING FOR UNLOVABLE CHURCH MEMBERS.** We can't change unlovable people. No program will fix the person who is power hungry or judgmental. Lasting transformation occurs only under the power of God – and that means we must pray for even the church members we like the least. *To not pray for them is to be unloving; indeed, it may be to be more like them than we care to admit.*

**7. Loving unlovable church members is an act of faith.** Jesus called 12 men to follow Him, and they were not always lovable. They fought among themselves, didn't always listen, and sought the best places in the kingdom. Still He loved them, knowing what the Father would do through them. *We must love unlovable church members with that same kind of trust and faith.*

**8. UNLOVABLE PEOPLE ARE OFTEN LONERS, AND LONERS NEED HELP WINNING SPIRITUAL BATTLES.** The church of Jesus Christ is designed to be a body, a family, an army, a people of God. We have never been intended to fight battles alone; instead, we fight together, guarding one another's back. *Loving an unlovable church member is one way OF HELPING HIM FIGHT SPIRITUAL BATTLES HE'S LIKELY LOSING ON HIS OWN.*

**9. ONLY GENUINE LOVE ALLOWS US TO CARRY OUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE WHEN NEEDED.** The time may come when a New Testament church must carry out the hard work of church discipline on an unlovable church member. When that happens, though, it must *be motivated by, and carried out with, Christian love.* Anything less becomes ungodly judgment.

**10. WE ARE ALL SOMETIMES UNLOVABLE.** All of us sometimes act less than Christian. Maybe nobody sees it, and perhaps it doesn't happen often – but it's still un-Christlike. We, too, will have those days when we need undeserved love. *Perhaps others will model then the love we've first shown them.*

## TESTIMONIAL THE CHURCH

Michelle VanSlate

Slamming the telephone onto the receiver, I flung my words of frustration at my husband, who sat in the family room watching the latest episode of Star Trek.

“I can’t believe it! It’s not fair.”

Bryan lowered the TV volume. “Who was it?” “Pastor Don. He said ... he said that I....” My throat closed over the rest of my sentence. I curled up on the couch and grabbed a box of tissues as tears spilled down my cheeks. I loved the church and had poured my heart into it, but now we were being pushed out. When my husband first took the job as an unpaid associate pastor, the church was positive and supportive. But as times got tough, the new guy and I, his wife, were taking the blame. These most recent allegations from Pastor Don were only the latest in a growing list of petty grievances against us.

Hurt, frustration, and confusion welled within me as Pastor Don’s accusations rang in my mind. “You should have...,” “You were wrong to...,” “This was your doing,” “You’re not being faithful.” And with each statement, I felt as if someone were jabbing me with a red-hot poker.

I hadn’t expected to be hurt like this, especially in the church. But with three tissues wadded in my fists, and my eyes red and puffy, there was no denying it: I had been burned by the church.

*By Anonymous:*

*Even though I haven’t technically left, I clocked out emotionally and just do the movements with the other attendees. I am there to worship my God, but all of the blood, sweat, and tears I gave has long been forgotten by those whom I trusted the most. I even trusted them with my salvation! Now, they are just faces. Not a single one was there for me and my son when we needed them. I’m already saved, so why bother with me now? They are too busy saving others and spending their time with the lost. I shared that vision, but now it all seems to be a masquerade. Every Sunday I know it’s just show time. “Ok, Camera 2 – Go wide. Camera 1 – Get me a close-up of the lead singer. Camera 2 – Give me a slow push towards the stage. In 5,4,3,2...it’s show time.”*



### MY PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF LOVING UNLOVEABLE CHURCH FAMILY...

(Conflict, climax/highlight, and resolution/decision)