



## **Does Unconditional Love Require Unconditional Relationship?**

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The scriptures clearly command us to love one another. Biblically that means that we are to seek another person's well-being, even when it is difficult and may cost us. Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Christ calls us to love our enemies and to do good to those to mistreat us (Matthew 5:44). Yet, how do we practically live that out when we are in a relationship with someone who repeatedly lies to us, mistreats us, tries to control us, or abuses us? Too often, we have misunderstood unconditional love as meaning unconditional relationship. There is a subtle but important distinction.

This past weekend I was speaking at a fundraiser for Focus Ministries, an organization that offers educational and supportive services to victims of domestic violence. A number of women shared with me that the counsel they received from their pastor, church leader, or Christian counselor was to reconcile—reminding her of God's command to forgive and to love unconditionally. Adultery, they said, was the only biblical grounds for divorce.

This blog is not about domestic violence or whether or not there are biblical grounds for separation or divorce. However, implied in the counseling these women received is the idea that we are called by God to maintain a relationship with someone even when he or she is repeatedly destructive toward us. But is that counsel truly biblical? Are we ever permitted to end a relationship or distance ourselves from someone because of their unchanged sinful behavior?

God's love for humankind is unconditional, but he does not offer anyone unconditional relationship. He tells us that our sin separates us from him, and that without repentance we have no fellowship with him (1 John 1:6). Our sin does not separate us from God's love (Romans 5:8), but it does separate us from his presence (Isaiah 59:1-2). Jesus distanced himself from certain religious leaders because he didn't trust them. He knew

what was in their hearts (John 2:24). Throughout much of the Old Testament, God withdraws his presence from his people because of unrepentant sin.

God calls people to a covenant relationship that is like a marriage. He not only wants us to enjoy his love, he wants us to love him back (Deuteronomy 6:5). He not only promises us his faithfulness, he requires that we be faithful in return (Deuteronomy 4:23-24). The book of Hosea is a picture of God's love for his unfaithful spouse (Israel). He longs for her, but his relationship with her will remain broken until she is willing to change.

In this sinful world there is no perfect person, and in every relationship there is some brokenness and suffering. That's why Jesus tells us that when someone sins against us, we are to go and talk to that person so that we can be reconciled. However, he also adds, if they refuse to hear you after you have repeatedly tried to get them to listen, "Treat them as you would a pagan and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17). Jesus says, if there is no repentance, the relationship you once had changes. Pagans and tax collectors were not trusted, nor were they friends, although a good Jew would help a pagan or tax collector who was in need, fulfilling the biblical mandate to love one's enemy.

There are certain basic conditions necessary for any relationship (personal and professional) to be healthy and safe. They are mutual caring, mutual honesty and mutual respect. The operative word is mutual. One person can certainly make a bad relationship better all by herself, which may eliminate some strife and dissension, but one person cannot turn a bad relationship into a good relationship all by herself. It is an unfair and heavy burden we have often unknowingly placed on people, because we want to be biblical.

What's the alternative? When my mother was ill and needed assistance, I was willing to go to her, help her out as I could, and care for her needs despite the fact that we had not spoken in over 15 years, due to her alcoholism and abusive behavior. I could love her unconditionally (seek her well-being), and I had long ago forgiven her, but we had no relationship. I did not trust her and I didn't not expect anything mutual. It was all one-sided; it was ministry not relationship.

We are indeed called to be imitators of Christ, and live a life of love (Ephesians 5:1), but let's not put a yoke on someone to do something that God himself doesn't do. God is good to the saint and unrepentant sinner alike, but he does not have relationship with both. When someone repeatedly sins against us and is not repentant and willing to change, it's not possible to have a healthy or safe relationship.

Being in close fellowship with someone is not a right, even if both people are Christians. It is a sacred privilege. The apostle Paul advises us to distance ourselves from people who are continually destructive, especially if their behaviors or attitudes are sinful and unacceptable—both to us and to God (1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15). Loving a person unconditionally may indeed require sacrifice and suffering, but we suffer and sacrifice for another person's good — not to allow them to continue to sin against us. That is foolishness, not biblical love. Too many counselees have been wrongly instructed that biblical love means they must be nice and suffer quietly, even as they are being mistreated and abused. But as C.S. Lewis wisely wrote, "Love is more stern and splendid than mere kindness."