

What the Bible Says About Love

By Alex Duke

Last week, in the midst of the conversation regarding same-sex marriage in the United States, President Barack Obama tweeted, “Retweet if you believe everyone should be able to marry the person they love. #LovesLove.”¹

Despite his necessary brevity, President Obama made a sweeping claim. That said, I want to sidestep the statement’s political attachments and say nothing further on the matter of [same-sex marriage](#), its legality, or the Christian response. What I do want to do, however, is investigate the statement’s ethos and compare it to the Bible.

This, after all, should be the general Christian response to everything: look at what the world calls “good,” “right,” and “love” and compare it to God’s Word, affirming what overlaps and scrapping the rest. I hope to do this with the task at hand: examining what the Bible says about love.

Love Isn’t Play-Doh

Using the president’s tweet as a kind of trampoline to the culture at large, it’s obvious the definition of “love” is assumed. A self-referential statement like “Love is love”—while rhetorically catchy—is ultimately meaningless when looked at in a definitional vacuum.

I contend that this popular iteration of the word “love” is indicative of a larger reality. Put simply, love’s endless pliability has stretched and re-stretched the word into complete subjectivism. This has not only emptied the word of its biblical and original meanings, but also rendered “love” a universal term for nothing in particular, where each use is imbued with the preferences and assumptions of whomever is talking. As such, many conversations about it feel like riding a merry-go-round in the dark.

God-Breathed Answers

When facing opposing truths claims, Christians should always look to Scripture first. If we believe the Apostle Paul when he says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,” then we have no better choice.²

That being said, there are several ways to answer the question of what the Bible says about love. After all, the [Bible](#) says a lot of things about love and, unlike a 140-character tweet, it is able to provide nuanced and contoured descriptions, explanations, and assertions—all coalescing into a definition of love that is multi-faceted but never contradictory, simple but never simplistic.

Love Is All About God

The first and most important thing we must recognize about love is that it is all about God. By this I mean that love both originates in and is exhausted by the Triune God—the [Trinity](#) of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus lets us peer into this reality in John 17. Here, in what is sometimes called the “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus prays for Christians both present and future. Among other things, he asks the Father to grant them continued unity and love, that he would keep them until the end, through the world’s inevitable hatred. Jesus also uses parts of the prayer to focus on himself, specifically his inevitable death. Knowing full well what awaits him, he asks that God would accomplish what he set out to do in sending his son to earth.³ He prays, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”⁴

A few verses later, Jesus says these words: “Father, I want those you have given me⁵ to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”⁶

¹ This tweet came from President Obama’s official Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/BarackObama>) and, though it was not signed by his personal moniker “bo,” one can be sure it reflects his opinions.

² *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, 2 Timothy 3:16–17.

³ Jesus often predicted his own death. For one example, see John 10:18.

⁴ *The Holy Bible*, John 17:5.

⁵ The “they” here refers to “those who will believe in me through [the disciples]’ message” (John 17:20).

⁶ *Ibid.*, John 17:24.

So, imagine you didn't exist. In fact, imagine nothing had ever existed—no people, no places, no things. Is anything left?

According to Jesus, yes. There is glory and presence and love left. Between whom? Between the eternally loving, eternally secure, and eternally complete Godhead. In other words, the Trinity and the affections and relationships present therein function as the foundation of love.

Without the Father loving the Son and the Spirit; without the Son loving the Father and the Spirit; and without the Spirit loving the Father and the Son—all “before the creation of the world”—we would know nothing of love because love would not exist.

So what must the Christian say about love? They must begin where the Bible begins, and the Bible finds love's roots in the Trinity.⁷

A Foundation Laid

Forgive me for cannonballing into the deep end right away. These biblical truths are prone to bewilder our mortal minds—which definitely includes my own. However, while admitting this difficulty, I'm also convinced these realities must function as undergirding assumptions behind our discussion of what the Bible says about love. If “God is love,” as the Apostle John asserts, then understanding love or God in any meaningful sense requires we first investigate on God's terms, in his Word.⁸ Then and only then will our discussion be both faithful and fruitful.

In sum, a biblical understanding of love finds its only acceptable origin in the Trinity, wherein there is both self-giving and authority, service and obedience. That's the first and most fundamental truth. If we hear or remember nothing else, we must at least remember this: love began with God—and was [personified in Jesus](#)—so to find the height of its meaning we need look nowhere other than God himself.

Culture's Counterfeit Coins

We look to God because [culture](#) is trafficking counterfeit coins, lying as they stamp “LOVE” on each one—be it sexuality and lust, abuse and exploitation, or greed and selfishness. Christians would do well to acknowledge this fact.

That being said, while God's love for himself is the white-hot nucleus of love's definition, we need not consider it exhaustive. What we see in Scripture is that God's love for God “boomerangs” out and affects everything else: how he loves his people, how his people love him, and how he expects his people to love other people.⁹ From here, let's simply try to track the flight of the boomerang.

Love Is Sacrificial

On top of being God-originated, biblical love is also sacrificial. This is communicated clearly through several biblical texts, specifically those that focus on the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus said to his disciples, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”¹⁰ The very next day, he did just that. While his friends scattered, denying they even knew him¹¹ and hiding in fear,¹² Jesus endured, suffered, and died for them.

The Apostle Paul further makes the connection between love and sacrifice in the book of Romans. He writes to a group of fellow Christians, reminding them of God's generous grace to them through Christ: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”¹³

And, of course, there is perhaps one of the most famous verses of the Bible: “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.”¹⁴ How did God show his love for us? By giving up his son for our benefit.

In Scripture, love is entwined with sacrifice. This is exemplified throughout the Bible, but we find its apex in the death of Jesus Christ, the perfect one who died for the sins of the world.

⁷ Of course, the purview of this article is not to answer the naturally raised question, “Why, then, were we created at all?” However, this is an admirable question, and a great treatment of it may be found in Michael Reeves's *Delighting in the Trinity*, specifically chapter 2, “Creation: The Father's Love Overflows.”

⁸ *The Holy Bible*, 1 John 4:8.

⁹ I'm borrowing the image of a boomerang from Jonathan Leeman's *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 107–114. In particular, I point you to his first two chapters, which say much of what I'm trying to communicate here—only better.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, John 15:13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, John 18:15–18, 25–27.

¹² *Ibid.*, John 20:19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Romans 5:8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, John 3:16.

On the cross, Jesus died for the already-dead. The hero died for the villain.¹⁵ He loves the unlovely and makes them loveable by graciously giving them what they need to be saved: faith and [grace](#). And this is “the gift of God.”¹⁶

Vertical to Horizontal

The primary thrust of Scripture is vertical, meaning it largely deals with the relationship between God and man, Creator and creation. Oftentimes, however, God clarifies the vertical via the horizontal. He uses horizontal imperatives—“Do this”—as a test for the presence of vertical realities.

So it is with love. Just as God’s love for us in Christ was sacrificial, so should our love be for each other. Jesus makes the point succinctly in John 13 when he says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”¹⁷ To flesh this out further, I think it is helpful to quote the Apostle Paul at length. To the church in Philippi, he writes:

Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹⁸

Here, Paul seamlessly connects the Christian ethics of love and service to Christ’s sacrifice. “Being of the same mind” and “having the same love” rivets us to the same person: Jesus Christ. He has set the example and served as the trailblazer of love and humility. The arithmetic is simple: God loved us sacrificially in Christ; therefore, emulating Christ, we love others sacrificially.

Love . . . and Authority?

As we’ve seen, the Bible tells us that love is God-originated, sacrificial, and manifests itself both horizontally and vertically. But that’s not all. Notice what Jesus says after the verse we’ve been quoting: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”¹⁹

Immediately, Jesus’ clarification grates against our culture as he introduces an element of authority into his definition of love. He does this because he is both Messiah—savior—and Lord—the holy and righteous Son of God. This must be stressed because any definition of love bereft of authority is simply sub-biblical.

Let’s consider the truths mentioned previously. There is love and authority within the Trinity, as it is Jesus who perfectly obeyed the Father’s will to die on the cross for sinners. Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”²⁰

Love and Authority at the Cross

There is also authority present in God’s sacrificial love for us. After all, participating in a [relationship with God](#) means submitting under his Lordship, under his right and righteous authority. We do not become Christians, run up a massive debt on the sin card, and expect Daddy to bail us out. It doesn’t work that way.

Instead, our disposition toward sin and holiness changes. We switch teams; no longer are we committed to our own autonomy. This is Paul’s point in Romans 6. I encourage reading the whole chapter, but here’s his beginning and end, which ties up his argument nicely. He writes:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who

¹⁵ Trip Lee, “One Sixteen,” featuring KB and Andy Mineo, *The Good Life*, Reach Records, 2012.

¹⁶ Ibid., Ephesians 2:8.

¹⁷ Ibid., John 13:35.

¹⁸ Ibid., Philippians 2:2–11.

¹⁹ Ibid., John 15:13–14.

²⁰ Ibid., Hebrews 12:2, emphasis mine.

have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? . . . But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.²¹

Again, being “loved” by Christ or “loving” Christ, yet holding on to our own unfettered freedom is a mirage, a trick of the Devil. We are always under the authority of some master. It’s merely a question of whether that master is harsh, fickle, and impossible to please—like sin—or gracious, constant, and pleased by faith²²—like God.²³

God’s love for us is intertwined in his authority because he loves us by enabling us to live under his righteous rule.

Love Looks Toward Heaven

Biblical love always looks toward heaven. By this I mean it doesn’t just have the “now” in mind. This manifests itself in at least two ways.

First, Christians love and encourage each other by reminding one another of their unchangeable status in Christ and by pointing each other to the cross, the empty tomb, and Jesus’ promised return. This is what Paul’s “same love” and “same mind” looks like.

Second, because conversion is real and Christians truly are “new creations,” when occasion requires, they admonish one another concerning the seriousness of sin and, with God’s help, push each other toward [holiness](#).²⁴ This is why it is almost always from a place of love—not judgment or nosiness—when a brother- or sister-in-Christ confronts me regarding my sin (though sometimes the delivery of such conversations can leave something to be desired). Though it may wound my pride, bristle my self-obsession, and tempt an argumentative response, deep down, I know it comes from a place of loving kindness, intended by God for my ultimate good.

Often, the latter is accomplished by a well-timed application of the former because any admonishment not couched in the realities of the gospel is a step toward moralism. Nineteenth-century Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne had it right when he said, “For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.”²⁵

This is a tricky dance, especially when applied to a Christian’s relationship with non-Christians—or with those who claim to be Christians but, by all accounts, appear [self-deceived](#).²⁶ In those situations, love still looks toward heaven, only differently.

Christians love non-Christians with “heavenward” love by commending the gospel and holding out Christ, all the while acknowledging it is God who changes the disposition of the heart.²⁷ For example, if a non-Christian were to read this article, I hope they would find it as forthright and engaging as it is disconcerting and confronting.

On Puddles and Oceans

Love is love; the world and the president of the United States have that much correct. But the Bible tells us it’s also so much more.

First, the Bible tells us of love’s origin—that it’s actually riveted outside ourselves, to the very character and nature of the triune God. Second, the Bible shows us the love of God in the sacrifice of Christ: a love that is both gracious because it is contra-conditional and authoritative because it changes us, bestowing on us the very things it requires through the Holy Spirit. Third, the Bible’s definition of love changes the way we love others—both believers and non-believers.

As Christians, we understand we’re standing on miles of identical ground; in fact, it is our equal status in Christ that enables us to love each other by both recounting the gospel to one another and, if necessary, correcting each other when mired in sin. Similarly, the Bible also exhorts us to love non-Christians with a heavenward love, not by conceding truth in order to win favor, but by adorning the gospel through our daily submission to the lordship of Christ.

The Bible says a lot about [love](#), but most of all, it raises our expectations and subverts our paradigms. It points to an ocean while the world’s busy playing in a puddle.

²¹ Ibid., Romans 6:1-2, 22-23.

²² Ibid., Hebrews 11:6.

²³ The following is not meant to cast an unrealistic expectation as to how “holy” Christians will be after their conversion. The struggle with sin remains present and unavoidable until death. (Check out the next chapter in Romans, chapter 7, for Paul’s depiction of this.) But this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. The third person of the Trinity literally dwells in the believer, convicts them of sin, and leads them into truth (Romans 8, John 14:15-31, 16:8, 13).

²⁴ *The Holy Bible*, 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²⁵ Robert Murray McCheyne, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne* (Edinburgh, 1894), 293. Pulled from Tony Reinke, “The Purifying Power of Delight in Christ,” <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/the-purifying-power-of-delight-in-christ>.

²⁶ For the biblical precedent for self-deception, see Matthew 7:21-23.

²⁷ *The Holy Bible*, 1 Corinthians 3:5-7, Psalm 51.