

God's Love: The Source and Standard

As we turn to the Christian tradition for help and guidance about love, we must begin with God's love for us. Unanimously (and there is not much in Christianity about which there is unanimity) that tradition teaches that the love of God for us defines love and makes it possible. It is the source of all genuine loves and the standard against which all that calls itself love must be tested. Conversely, our love for God is the center and heart of Christian life, the first goodness from which all other real goods of character and conduct flow. But it is not enough to say that the church universally teaches that the love of God is the wellspring and the touchstone of all true loves. We must also ask, Why is this teaching held to be true, and how does our experience confirm it?

Here the obsession of our popular culture comes to our aid, for we do not have to go far to find evidence that our efforts to give and receive love meet with obstacles and failures at every turn. Novels, movies, and song lyrics are full of the mistakes we make in love and the pain they cause. These stories resonate with us because most of us would have some of the same stories to tell if we were to share them. We love the wrong people, or we love the right ones badly. We find ourselves unable to return the love offered us by another, and we learn that this inability can be as painful as discovering that someone we love does not love us. We both do and suffer wrong in our human relationships. Not only are we deceived by others, mistaking counterfeit loves for the real thing, but we also deceive ourselves. We think we love someone, only to have time

show that we mistook who that person really was, or mistook our own temporary neediness for something more enduring.

Even when our loves are truest, most genuine and enduring, we often find that we do not know how to love others well. We grope for the deeds that will nurture and sustain those we love, for the words that will enable them to flourish in and be warmed by our affection. We do not always find them. This is perhaps most famously true in our romantic loves. Their sad tales are told by the high rate of failure in our marriages, and by the fear of marriage expressed by so many young adults who have endured the pain of family dissolution in their childhoods. But it is true as well in our other loves. It is evident in the frustration and grief of parents who find themselves continually at odds with their children, in the chill of friendships that grow weak and strained and dutiful, in the loneliness of those whose relationships are too superficial even for conflict.

To be sure, this is not the whole story. Our loves do not fail us every time or in every respect. I suspect that if they did we would find our lives unbearable. But a person who reaches maturity without significant losses, without fractures and alienations that leave behind a residue of grief and regret, is rare indeed—thus the continuing brisk trade in self-help books that promise to remedy, heal, or prevent our failures at loving.

But healing and prevention are not that easy, for what all these failures represent is a kind of confrontation with ourselves. This confrontation is in part an encounter with our limitations, our honest errors, and our finite resources of insight and wisdom and energy. But it is also a confrontation with darker things. It is true enough that we are imperfect in our understanding and limited in our strength, unable to see into another's heart and only partly acquainted with our own. But we find that we lack not only the wisdom to love well but also the courage to love faithfully when it is hard, costly, or lonely to do so. We are often fearful, driven by the impulse to protect ourselves, and we lack the strength and wholeness that would enable our loves to be free, and freeing to others. To put it more pointedly, our loves are challenged and frequently compromised by a kind of selfishness. Even the need to love and be loved, so basic to our humanity and in

one sense the best that is in us, can be fatal. Our very human hunger to be loved can turn devouring.

Grappling with the limits and failures of human loves helps us understand why Christians have always held that it is the love of God that must be the starting point and standard of true love. For God does not share our limitations or our ignorance and is not driven either toward love or away from it by any fear or lack. Knowing us completely and needing nothing from us, God loves us without illusions and without deception, and entirely for our own sake. Thus only God's love is perfectly secure, *unconditional* in a full and unqualified sense. God alone, being supremely free and whole in Godself, can love in perfect liberty, purely out of strength and not weakness.

Surely this utter clarity and purity of motive, this perfectly outward-focused nurture and celebration of another being entirely for her or his own sake, is what we mean by love. At least this is what we *want* to mean and dimly feel we *ought* to mean by it. Yet the chasm between all the various things in ourselves we call love and the wholly unselfish commitment to the well-being of another is wide. In fact, so great is the contrast that some have questioned whether, by this standard, the sorts of passions, attachments, and commitments humans are capable of even deserve to be called love. To the questions surrounding the nature of human and divine love, and to the matter of whether they really are or can be the same sort of thing at all, we will return in the next chapter. For now it is enough to begin at the beginning: to explore what Christian tradition teaches about the centrality of love to God's nature and to the message Christians have to proclaim. Above all, we need to understand what this love has to do with our lives.

STEADFAST MERCY: THE LOVE OF GOD IN HEBREW SCRIPTURE

To explore the love of God we must start with what Christians commonly call the Old Testament, if only to counter a belief that is false but stubbornly persistent: the myth that the God of the

Law and the Prophets is full of wrath and judgment and is to be contrasted with the God of the New Testament, who is gracious and forgiving to the point of being rather a pushover. Of course such a view is altogether at odds with fundamental Christian beliefs: that God is One and that the God who is incarnate in Jesus Christ *is* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But there is an even more basic problem, which is that neither of these contrasting sketches of the character of God bears much resemblance to the way God is represented in the Bible.

In fact, the theme of God's love and its constant expression runs throughout the whole of Hebrew scripture. A variety of Hebrew words are used to name God's loyalty, compassion, and commitment toward the creatures God has made. Two of them in particular (*'ahab* and *hesed*) are frequently translated "love." *'Ahab* is the more general term and it can be used to mean love for God or people or inanimate things. The Hebrew word most commonly used for God's love is *hesed*, which is used only to indicate love toward persons. This word has the flavor of mercy shown to the needy and it connotes love that moves one to rescue. It is therefore sometimes rendered by such words as *faithfulness* or *compassion*, and sometimes by two-word constructions such as "steadfast love," "loving-kindness," or "saving mercy." As is so often the case in translation, there is no true equivalent for *hesed* in English. Still, there can be no doubt that the word captures much of what we mean when we conceive of the love of God as it reaches from the height of power and holiness to human beings in their weakness and need.

The whole of Psalm 136 is a hymn whose refrain is an affirmation of God's *hesed*. Each of its twenty-six verses ends the same way, displaying that merciful love is the very heart of Israel's understanding of God's nature and activity:

O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his
 steadfast love endures forever. . . .
 to him who by understanding made the heavens,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his
 steadfast love endures forever;

and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love
 endures forever. . . .
 he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love
 endures forever. . . .
 O give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast
 love endures forever!
 PSALM 136:1,5,23–26 RSV¹

For the psalmist, the enduring love of God is the framework within which all divine acts are to be understood. It is love that brings creation and all its wonders into being (vv. 5–9), and love that leads Israel out of slavery in Egypt (vv. 11–12). The same love leads the people through want and danger into a land and a heritage (vv. 13–14, 21–22). Love is the impetus behind God's action even when that action is violent, as when God strikes down not only the oppressive Pharaoh (vv. 10, 15) but also other kings who threaten Israel (vv. 19–20). God's loving-kindness is characterized by his remembering the lowly who have no other hope and coming to their rescue (vv. 23–24). But God's loving care extends beyond the people chosen to be God's own, and indeed beyond humanity itself. It is manifest in his sustenance of life on the Earth, for all creatures receive their food from God's hand (v. 25).

Other psalms expand on each of these themes and add many others. The steadfast love of God is the hope of the righteous who long for communion with God (Ps. 5:7) and of the sick who ask God for mercy and help (Ps. 6:4). The love of God is seen in the defense of the innocent from their enemies (Ps. 17:7) and celebrated as the sure basis of confidence for those who are beset with troubles (Ps. 31:21). It is the repentant sinner's assurance of pardon (Ps. 32:10; 51:1), the last refuge against despair for those drowning in grief (Ps. 57:10), and the final plea of those staggering under the weight of divine punishment (Ps. 77:7–9).

The same confidence that God is known in enduring love is shown in the rest of the Old Testament, where it is woven through narrative, prophecy, and law. In an act poignant for its evocation of a lost intimacy, God is shown providing for the couple cast out of Eden, making garments to cover the nakedness that their disobedience has made a matter for shame (Gen. 3:21). Not even

righteous anger at human wickedness can completely overcome God's compassion, so a way of rescue is provided for humankind even in the midst of the judgment of the flood (Gen. 6:13–18). The calling of Israel is expressly attributed to divine love, as God “sets his heart upon” Israel in her weakness and insignificance and makes her his own people (Deut. 7:7–8). The giving of the Law itself is the mark of God's passionate desire to make Israel a people and to bless them (Deut. 33:3–4).

Even the calls to obedience to God's commands and the dire threats of suffering and disaster to follow disobedience are understood within the biblical narrative as expressions of love. They come out of God's passionate desire that the people would choose the way of life and flourishing (Deut. 30:28). Moreover, the warnings of the punishment to follow unfaithfulness are oddly coupled with two predictions. The first is that Israel would certainly fail to heed those warnings. The second is that when, at the end of a long, bitter period of sorrow and suffering, Israel turned again to God, she would be welcomed into a renewed and deepened covenant. Both predictions are already in view in the closing pages of Deuteronomy:

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations to which the Lord your God has driven you; and you return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice with all your heart and all your soul: then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples. . . . And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. [Deut. 30:1–3, 6 RSV]

It is the persistent and tender love of God, often spurned and disregarded, that binds God to Israel despite her repeated flirtations with other gods and other loves: “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 fierce anger" (Hosea 11:8–9).

But despite God's enduring loyalty to Israel, divine compassion is not limited to the covenant people. The artful story of Jonah highlights God's readiness to forgive even the inhabitants of Nineveh, capital city of Israel's great enemy, Assyria. Jonah, an obscure prophet who counseled king Jeroboam, is called on to deliver news of God's coming judgment upon the city. Instead Jonah flees, boarding a ship for Tarshish so that God must pursue and miraculously return him to shore. Finally Jonah declares the word of the Lord to the city. To Jonah's dismay, Nineveh repents and is spared. Peevishly Jonah complains to God: "This is why I fled to Tarshish; for I knew that you were a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2). So offended is Jonah by God's mercy to the enemy that he sits down in a booth in the wilderness, announcing his intention to wait for death. In a vivid parable, God answers Jonah's anger over the death of a vine God has made to shade him, pointing out that Jonah had not made the vine whose loss he grieves, whereas God has made all the people of Nineveh, "who do not know their right hand from their left," along with all its livestock (Jon. 4:11).

God's sovereignty over all the Earth and its peoples, and the justice of God's judgment of them, is allied with divine compassion for them all. Even the book of Isaiah, written amid the pains of exile and full of excoriations of Israel's enemies, retains this universal vision. In the midst of the alternating pleas, promises, and denunciations that fill its chapters, we can still find predictions that one day even "the nations" will come to know and worship God and be welcomed into fellowship. With this consummation in view, God can call out to "Egypt, my people" and "Assyria, the work of my hands" (Isa. 19:21–25).

The writers of Hebrew scripture used every means at their disposal to convey the breadth and depth, the warmth, and the sheer unshakeable persistence of divine love. This love is variously pictured in poetry and parable, metaphor and story, where it is compared to (and ultimately dwarfs by comparison) the passion

of lovers and the tender devotion of mothers. God is the people's eager bridegroom, their faithful husband, their loving father, their devoted shepherd. But love is not always soft. The course of the love between God and humankind is anything but smooth, and the saga is full of failure, abandonment, and rebellion, to which God responds with grief and anger.

A defining moment of Hebrew prophecy is the recognition that the judgments pronounced against Israel's enemies could be brought down on Israel's own head as well. Rebuking those who look to the "day of the Lord" as a time of vindication for Israel and retribution upon her adversaries, Amos declares, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! . . . Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:18, 21, 23–24 RSV). (Twenty-seven centuries later a modern prophet, Martin Luther King Jr., used these same words to shatter the complacency of another empire secure in the belief that God was on her side, no matter her offenses.)

Similar themes are laced through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Hosea. All of these prophets unite to declare not merely God's wrath against Israel's foes but also God's righteous condemnation of Israel and Judah for the twin offenses of unfaithfulness to God and oppression and indifference toward the poor, including the stranger. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is recognized as more than a tribal deity, more than the reliable partisan of Israel, when the requirement of loyalty to God is extended to mercy and equity within the community and to hospitality and justice outside of it.

But it is the genius of Hebrew scripture to place even judgment within love's orbit. *Because* the loving mercy of God is universal in its scope, so must be God's judgment upon evil. God's justice and desire for the flourishing of all God's creatures causes God to condemn and promise the destruction of everything that destroys life, undermines community, and rends the peace and unity of creation.

The jealousy attributed to God in the Law and the Prophets is not, like so much of our own jealousy, an expression of fear and mere possessiveness. It is God's fierce and absolute rejection of all the false gods and false loves that will lead humankind astray and ultimately be death dealing. The life of the world has its source in God, without whom it cannot endure, and the covenant is the framework of faithful and forgiving mutuality that makes human communion with God possible. The second book of that covenant, what Christians have named the New Testament, brings news of the extraordinary lengths to which God has gone to renew and sustain that bond.

LOVE MADE FLESH: THE LOVE OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Even people who know very little of the New Testament are likely to have seen the message "God is love," if only on a bumper sticker on the way to work or on a Sunday school poster in childhood. Because these few words are so often left to stand alone, it is not easy to tell just what they mean or how they might have any bearing on our struggles. They may sound like happy talk, a religious version of "have a nice day"—OK on a Sunday school poster, maybe, but not very helpful in guiding our grown-up lives. But the words are part of a passage from one of the letters of John, where they come as a caution to those who might be tempted to think they are advancing far in the Christian life. Here they are in their original setting:

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God, and everyone that loves is born of God, and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. [1 John 4:7–8 AT]

The historical context of these words makes plain the challenge they offer. Biblical scholars believe this letter was written around the end of the first century after Christ's birth, when the generation that had known Jesus directly was passing or gone. At

this time there were several ongoing arguments about who Jesus was, about why he had come, and particularly about how those who belonged to him were supposed to live.² Various schools of thought and various teachers were claiming to be the true guides to spiritual maturity. The writer of this letter is sending a message not to one particular person or even to one congregation but to a whole group of churches beset by conflicting directions. He is telling them how they can know the difference between true and false claims about Christian faith and life.

He begins the passage with this warning: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). First he tells his readers to trust only those who confess that Jesus came in the flesh (4:4). (This is a defense against certain supposedly Christian groups who despised the body and therefore denied that the Son of God could really have taken on flesh.) But because well-sounding words are not enough to identify those who are faithful teachers, he further explains how those who truly know God will behave: they will practice love, because that is what they have received and learned from God.

The author does not content himself with merely saying that those who really know God will be loving. That would suggest that his readers could define the meaning of love to which God conforms, and there were as many pretenders to the title of love in the first century as there are in our own. Instead, he offers a quite concrete and singular definition:

God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.
[4:9–10, 16]

For the writer of 1 John, the coming-in-flesh of God’s Son defines love. This is what love looks like and how it is lived out in a world where the communion between God and humankind

has been violated and broken. The letter has already made explicit the extremity to which love will go: "By this do we know love, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us . . ." (3:16). This is the ground of Christian confidence and hope: that God's love has been made evident, visible, and utterly unmistakable in Christ, so that we might "know and believe," experience and trust, the depth of God's love.

The love of God, then, is not an idea, nor is it simply a feeling or attitude on God's part. It is an activity, one that leads to the cross. The character of God's love is essentially expressed in this: its readiness to go to any lengths, to the outer limit of self-sacrifice, to restore the relationship that is broken by sin. It is important to note that love undertakes the costly work of reconciliation from God's own side. The initiative comes not from the offenders seeking pardon but from the righteous One, who abandons his just claim in order to heal the breach by taking its fatal consequences upon himself.

It should be easy to recognize that it is *hesed*, the abiding, long-suffering, determined, and unshakeable love of God, that is made flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodied form of God's love, and this is the one whom all Christians claim to have met. This is what enables the writer of 1 John to say with such perfect simplicity, "God is love; anyone who does not love, does not know God."

The letters of John offer us the classic biblical expression of self-giving love as at once the nature and the activity of God, and the sure test of anything that claims to reveal God to us. But in the writings of Paul, particularly the letter to the Romans, we find the fullest exploration of how the love of God made known in Christ transforms human existence. The continuity may be hard to see at first. Paul's starting point is the righteous judgment of God upon evil, and upon the wickedness of those who proclaim evil to be good. Speaking of those who have turned away from the knowledge of God, he begins a fairly hair-raising catalog:

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness,

they are slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who do such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them, but even applaud those who practice them. [Rom. 1:29–32]

The rhetoric is fierce and off-putting. Of course we may find tolerable enough the notion that God will judge the wicked, who (we reassure ourselves) are obviously not us. We may find ourselves, like Israel before us, enjoying a little the expectation that those whose wrongdoing is obvious to us will be punished. Perhaps, like the Pharisee in Luke's story (18:10–14), we may even thank God that we are not like those "others" whom Paul describes.

But just as we are comfortably anticipating (and joining in) the condemnation of these others, Paul's argument takes a stunning turn: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself" (Rom. 2:1). It turns out that Paul's point is not to show how the world is divided into those who satisfy God's righteousness and those who do not. Neither is it to reinforce the complacency of those of us who take ourselves to belong to the favored group. It is instead to show that all human beings stand together under the same judgment, condemned by the same standard of God's holiness, judged by our very readiness to see others' sins but not our own. Our real condition is dire:

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. As it is written, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one. There is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless." [Rom. 3:96–12a]

But Paul does not go to these lengths merely to declare God's judgment upon all evil. Instead he gathers all human beings under a single judgment in order that he may pronounce over all of us God's single verdict of acquittal:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as the sacrifice of atonement by his blood, to be received through faith. [Rom. 3:23–25a]

For a single-sentence statement of the gospel's central claim, one might do worse. For Paul as for John, the presence of God's love is made manifest by the Incarnation, and its nature is made plain by the Cross.

The outcome of trust in God's mercy offered in Christ is what Paul calls *justification*, peace with God in a restored relationship. The whole balance of the letter to the Romans is occupied with laying out the transforming power of faith in Christ, the way in which it fundamentally changes our relationship with God, with ourselves, and with one another.

The critical thing, and the thing Paul spends much of his time on, is how little, in one sense, any of this has to do with us. It is God's initiative, God's sacrifice, God's work, as faith itself is God's gift and not our accomplishment. The salvation that Paul is at such pains to explicate rests firmly on God's goodness rather than on any goodness of ours, and for that reason it can exclude the two besetting corruptions of all religious life: pride and anxiety.

Our self-satisfaction is excluded, says Paul, by the knowledge that our acceptance by God is a testimony solely to God's forgiving love and the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and is no part of our own doing. "For by grace have you been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, and not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

Also excluded is the endless, anxious wondering that can torment a person who takes God's righteousness seriously. "Have I done enough? Offered enough sacrifices, said enough prayers, done enough good deeds? Have I been sorry enough to make up for all the things I have done? Even all the inward, secret things that no one else even suspects? Have I managed to satisfy God?" Paul's answer to all such anguished self-doubt is that it wholly misplaces the issue. It is not our goodness or even our

repentance but rather God's reconciling love that comes first: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

The result of such an understanding is a striking blend of humility and confidence, and its fruit is joy. Indeed, no one spends more time celebrating the goodness of God and the sure triumph of divine mercy than does Paul. His hymn to the saving power of God's love is unequalled:

What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or peril, or sword? . . . No; in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Rom. 8:35; 37–39 RSV]

From this standpoint, and perhaps only from here—in this certainty of a love nothing could shake—it is possible to see how we might find the ground of a whole new existence. We might learn to pray without pretense, confident that God who knows and loves us already will not turn away. Secure in an embrace that depends on God's faithfulness rather than our own, it would be possible to bear the whole truth about ourselves. We could come to a genuine self-acceptance, one that rests on God's fully knowing welcome instead of on the futilities of self-deception or on the esteem of the other people we struggle to impress. We could thus give up trying to "clean up our acts" in favor of cleaning up our hearts.

Finally, armed with the humility that comes of truthful self-knowledge and with the confidence of being nevertheless beloved and secure, we might find new resources of patience and compassion, gentleness and forgiveness, to lavish on others. Being the beneficiaries of such a love, rescued and sustained by a grace we can neither merit nor repay, we might begin the long journey

toward learning to love as we have been loved. This, then, is why Christians have always insisted that the love of God must be the source and starting point of all human love: God's love teaches us what love is, and makes our loves possible.

FROM GOD'S LOVE TO HUMAN LOVE

In the story the Bible tells, the love of God is the starting point of all human experience. It is God's love we see at work in creation, and God's saving mercy that is the origin of the covenants with Abraham and with Israel. From the beginning God goes before us: calling us into being, lavishing loving attention on us, seeking us out when we wander off, and reaching out to us in mercy before we ever acknowledge our wrongdoing or our need for forgiveness. The experience of God's love, most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, awakens in us an answering love for God, and its first character is gratitude. As 1 John says, "We love because [God] first loved us" (4:19).

But gratitude is not the sum total of our response. We are used to thinking of God's judgment in terms borrowed from law, as debts that require repayment or crimes that exact a punishment, and such language is found in scripture (for example, Matt. 6:12; Rom. 1:22; II Thess. 1:9). But what is accomplished by God's grace is not merely the cancellation of a debt or the remittance of a penalty; it is the restoration of a relationship. Closely allied with the peace of reconciliation with God is the dawning of something we may call adoration. It is the beginning of a kind of pure delight in God's goodness and beauty, the celebration of God's greatness as an object of praise in and for itself.

The effort to give voice to that delight in God fills the psalms, where it is expressed both as longing for God and in hymns about the sweetness of life in God's presence. It brings Paul to the outer limits of what can be said, until he grasps for words and falls silent: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable are his ways" (Rom. 11:33).

Something of the breadth and depth of the response that God's mercy is to call forth in us is expressed already in the first commandment: "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4). Such a love for God is understood as the basis of all goodness in human character and conduct, even as the rejection of God is seen as the root cause of all kinds of evil and corruption. Love is the foundation on which every act of obedience and faithfulness is built, that which makes such acts really good and not merely seemingly good, for without such love even our best acts "profit us nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3 KJV).

But the relationship between God and the human being, for all its intensity and intimacy, does not remain strictly between these two. Just as we love the child of a friend for the friend's sake, so Christians are to embrace all those whom God loves for God's sake. What God has done for us, and the love called forth in response, joins us not only to God but also to one another. In fact, so close is the connection that the writer of 1 John can say with complete confidence, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

The authority for this intimate connection between love for God and love for other people is not only in 1 John but also in Jesus' own teaching. When he is asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replies by quoting Deuteronomy, that the greatest commandment of all is the command to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength (Matt. 22:37). But he says immediately that the next is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself. He concludes by adding, "On these two hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:40).

This saying, which scholars call "the double love command," seems simple and easy to understand, if not easy to obey. But the first suggestion that it is not so easy even to understand comes already in Luke's version of the same story. There the words about loving God and neighbor are placed in the mouth of a teacher of the Law. But hardly are the words out of his mouth when he himself asks, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). The

Gospel writer who recorded this story suggests that the questioner is really just trying to exonerate himself and is not fully sincere. But it is an understandable question.

If we are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, it becomes a matter of pressing importance to find out the scope and especially the limits of that obligation. Does it apply only to those near at hand? Our families? Those whom we know? Those who share our religion? Our nationality? Just how far does it go? These are very natural, very human questions. That is why Jesus' answer is so powerful, and so disturbing. For instead of answering the question, *Who belongs to the category? To whom do I owe this kind of devotion?* Jesus tells a story—and what a story!

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who beat him and stripped him and went away leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that same road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place, and saw him he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him, and when he saw him he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he produced two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said, "Go, and do likewise." [Luke: 10:30–37]

The parable we call "The Good Samaritan" is not a story about how to tell where the boundaries are; it is a story about how we go about breaking open the boundaries so that more people come within them. The Samaritan helps a stranger who likely would have despised him as a heretic. (Jews of the time regarded Samaritans as having fallen away from the true religion, as worse than the heathen.)

It is, if you like, a story about how we imitate God by looking to reforge connections where they have been broken, even by the other party. It requires that we put ourselves at the disposal of the others whose kinship we reclaim. Like so many of the parables, the conduct it recommends is risky and expensive, and a little outrageous. It is not, one feels sure, what the lawyer was looking for.

And of course it is not what we are looking for either. It is frankly hard to imagine what it would look like to take such a commandment seriously. Are we simply to love as we love ourselves all those whom we encounter in need, including those who would (like the man who fell among thieves) certainly not count us among their neighbors? How? Will a general absence of malice or a weak goodwill be enough? Is a modest generosity—say, the change we happen to have in our pockets—enough? Or are we supposed to put our time and our resources at the service of some stranger's need? How much? For how long? How can this be practical? Jesus cannot be serious!

Except that he seems to be entirely serious. Words like these are found not just in the Gospel of Luke but also in Matthew and Mark, Paul and James, the letters of Peter, and the letter to the Hebrews. To the general command to love the neighbor as the self (cited six times) are added more specific and concrete instructions to love strangers, enemies, and persecutors, as well as concrete directions as to the form that love is to take. (Forgiveness, kindness, forbearance, and generosity are prominent in the description of love's character, and active material provision of food, clothing, and shelter are included.)³

The common thread in all these texts is that we are to offer to others what God has shown toward us: a generous and active care that reaches across barriers and offenses and takes on itself the task of reconciliation, even where we are the offended party. The rationale for all this is simple: the world has been loved by God as an enemy. Indeed, *we* have been loved even when we have made ourselves and remained the enemies of God, for “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son” (Rom. 5:10). It is the love of God that reaches

out to rescue us, and we testify to and celebrate and make visible that love in this one fundamental way: by imitation. Therefore Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. . . . But love your enemies, and do good . . . and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:32, 35).

But we are not quite finished. While we are still trying to absorb the suggestion that God calls us to put our time and money and energy at the disposal of even our enemies, the final penny drops. The first letter of John is where we find the classic expression of the nature of God as love. It is also where the extraordinary price of God's love is made perfectly explicit and put forward as the model for the love we are commanded to show toward one another.

This chapter earlier quoted the beginning of 1 John 3:16. Here it is in its entirety: "By this we know love, that [the Son] laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters." This, then, is the ultimate standard, that those who know God keep his commandments, which are "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and that we love one another as he has loved us"—that is, all the way to sacrifice. How can we take seriously demands as radical and even terrifying as these?

It may be some help to recognize that they are not really presented as demands at all. They are instead proclamations of what God in Jesus Christ has done and made possible, for this is where John's letter begins. God has broken into a world lost in rebellion and isolation, enslaved by the inevitability of death and the fear of judgment, and reclaimed its territory as God's own. God, "in whom there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), is faithful as well as just (1:9) and offers to cleanse of unrighteousness all who turn to God so that they may dwell with God in holy joy.

The shape of our embracing of that extraordinary offer is simply this: that in response to the extravagance of God's love we

might begin to love those who share it with us. This is not a *rule* for obtaining life with God, like a ticket you must produce to get in the door. It is the *character* of a life shared with the God who is love. It is not a requirement as much as it is an invitation, for love, after all, is the very heart of the flourishing for which God made the world. But even with all that said, it would be absurd not to acknowledge that the possibility seems remote: Can we learn to love as God loves? Can we even want to?

In the next chapter we return to the problem we skirted earlier, of what kind of love we can believe ourselves capable of and whether there is any hope of our obeying the command to love God and our neighbor.