

God's Surpassing Love

Quite often I will see on Facebook a comment or post by someone who otherwise claims to be a non-believer in Christ. But they will make a statement intended to shame Christians who stand for biblical morality and the righteousness of God. They will scoff, “But didn’t Jesus command you to love others? So how can you be so hateful?” This in regard to our stand that homosexuality or pedophilia or abortion or any other number of sins are actually sins.

However, we make our stand to show the love of God. After all, the Lord came to redeem us from sin, to give us a new life free of sin and its ugly effects, and to bring eternal life in heaven where death and hell were the former destiny. His love reaches out to people in their sin. His love yearns to lift them from that sin and give them a new life, a holy life. He knows the pain and penalty of sin and wants to deliver all people from that pain and penalty. His love nailed him to a cross—for us. And that’s the kind of love we want to share with others, in spite of their scoffing and false accusations of being “haters.”

People who make these taunts against us don’t know Jesus. They don’t know what God’s love really is. Their view of love is whatever emotion rings their bell—platonic closeness, erotic lust, or perverse fantasy. Whatever. They don’t have a clue about the kind of love meant in the Scriptural command to love one another and to love God above all else.

This free resource is a supplement to Chapter 10 in my book *Victory through Voice: How to Speak Truth when the Culture Demands Silence*. In this essay, I hope to clarify for the reader what God’s love is all about and how important it is for us to receive it and to share it.

Love Defined

What is real love? Is it the sugar-coated acceptance and celebration of sin, validating whatever the world tells us is love? No. Is it the raw attraction people feel for another, regardless of situation, sex, gender, or age? No. Is it the outward show of a feigned virtue based on redefined morals and tolerance of ungodliness? No, again. Yet, the culture would tell us that love (a) accepts as true and right whatever others claim is right; and (b) makes no attempt to correct or rescue them from an eternity separated from Christ.

Instead, love is what God demonstrated for us in sending his Son to die for us. His love sought to bring good to us regardless of the cost to him. After redemption was made—once for all—God’s love now seeks us out, draws us to himself, and blesses us in more ways than we can imagine. We can’t copy or reproduce this love in ourselves. The most we can do is to share this love with others. We do this by letting God’s love flow through us to them and by introducing them to the God of love.

Paul defines and describes love in 1 Corinthians 13—the familiar “love chapter.” After talking about the gifts of the Spirit, Paul moves on to show “a more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31 MEV). A more excellent way for what? To care for one another, as stated in 1

Corinthians 12:25: “That there should be no division in the body, but that the parts should have the same care for one another” (MEV).

The first verse of the fourteenth chapter continues the discussion with the exhortation to “Follow after love” AND “desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1 MEV). The Greek word translated “love” in this section is “agape.” It means to love or feel affection or benevolence. It involves the *will*, as a matter of duty or principle, rather than an emotional response of the *heart*. We must choose to offer this kind of love to others, just as God chose to offer it to us. It’s not something we *fall into* or *fall out* of. That’s why the translators in King James’ day used the English word “charity.”

We dare not take one phrase out of 1 Corinthians 13 and make it mean that we are to accept everyone’s sin as okay. Though we are to love the person who sins, we are not to validate the sin. Notice verse 6, that this kind of love “rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (MEV). This love seeks the greater good, the eternal purpose of God. It should govern our attitudes and actions. Paul sums it up at the end of that Corinthian letter, “Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Corinthians 16:14 MEV).

The way we show God’s love, then, is a measure of our integrity. Hence, the testimony of our life becomes a vibrant and vital part of our witness to the dark world that the True Light has come and his name is Jesus. Speaking the truth in love must be backed up by living the truth in love. Then, as we proclaim his work in our lives, we also declare that he will work in the lives of others.

That way of his work is love, not dominance. He desires to have a willing people, those who choose his light and love—who freely love him in return. He wants people who will let his love dwell in them and flow through them to others. We read of this in Romans 5:5, where Paul says, “because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (MEV). Love is God’s motivation. It can be ours also.

However, we cannot let the world define God’s kind of love. Over and over in the Bible, God tells us what his love looks like. God’s love is not an acceptance of sin as okay, which might bring a self-gratifying sense of self-righteous tolerance. But such tolerance is virtue signaling, not true righteousness. God’s love requires us to minister reconciliation to those in sin—for their eternal good. (See 2 Corinthians 5:17–20.) It forbids us to smile on their sin.

Those who do smile on their sin, flaunting their tolerance as “love,” are like the Pharisees to whom Jesus said,

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27–28 NLT)

If their tolerance is love, it is an ill-defined love, not God’s love.

Does God love the sinner? Yes. Does he accept the sin as good or normal or acceptable? No. To do so would be to deny his integrity, profane his character, and violate his nature. And love

for God dictates that we bring our lives and voices into line with his sovereign decrees. This requires us to know his Word.

What Does Real Agape Love Look Like?

Let's look at love as described by Paul in Ephesians 5:1–5:

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God. Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people. Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes—these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God. You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.
(NLT)

Because Jesus offered himself for us, we are to walk in love. That love is to be sacrificial and fragrant. We are not to embrace sin or even name it as a practice among us. This includes sex outside of marriage (sexual immorality), homosexual and incestuous relations and pedophilia (impurity), and covetousness (greed, which is idolatry). Covetousness is the desire to have another person's property or spouse.

Furthermore, we are to have nothing to do with a filthy mouth, dirty jokes, and playing tricks on others. I would assume that pornography fits in here as something to be avoided. Instead, we are to give thanks to God for what we have and who we are. We are to thank him for his great love and the salvation freely given to us by grace through faith. A mouth that thanks him cannot at the same time make lewd and offensive comments.

Notice that the person who continually commits fornication or unclean sexual acts, or who covets what others have, will have no inheritance in heaven. We cannot violate God's righteousness and expect an inheritance or reward in his kingdom.

Paul continues the admonition in verses 6–7: “Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins, for the anger of God will fall on all who disobey him. Don't participate in the things these people do” (NLT). He warns against those who would mislead believers by excusing these sins.

There are many—some even who are ordained ministers—who deceive believers with empty words that redefine *love* and re-characterize God's *holiness*. These deceivers substitute wrongly-defined human sexual love (which is lust) for God's sacrificial and fragrant love. They offer self-righteous virtue signaling as a standard of holiness. While they outwardly appear loving and generous, like the Pharisees they “ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23 NLT). They stubbornly disobey God, as do those whose sins they validate.

We are to have nothing to do with those who disobey. We are not to participate in their works—the sins they commit or allow. Paul reminds us that we might have committed those sins before we accepted Jesus, but we must not continue in that darkness. He writes in Ephesians 5:8–14:

For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them. It is shameful even to talk about the things that ungodly people do in secret. But their evil intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them, for the light makes everything visible. (NLT)

We may have started out in darkness, but because we accepted Jesus and came to his light, we became light in the Lord. Because we are light, we are to walk as children of light, showing what is acceptable to God. We are to expose the works of darkness. We do so in order to warn others about the penalty of remaining in their sin.

Light shines into dark areas and reveals what's hidden—spiders, dust bunnies, and bits of rubbish. So also does our spiritual light shine into the dark culture and reveal what's hidden—wrong attitudes, sinful behavior, and deceptive actions. And remember, exposing sin is part of the instruction for us to “live a life filled with love” (Ephesians 5:2 NLT). Often we expose sin by our right living, without uttering a word. But our motive must be love, not self-righteousness.

In summary, love, as God defines it, is righteous by his standards and has an element of gratitude in it. That love is not a blind and blatant acceptance of sinful actions or attitudes, covering them with a self-satisfying blanket of politically correct tolerance. Rather, love corrects error. Love seeks the eternal and temporal good of the other. God's mercy and grace are contained in his love, but that love does not violate God's holiness and his Word.

In fact, in 1 John 4:8, 16, we read that “God is love.” His very nature is love. His character is righteousness. Thus, if God is righteous and is love, then his kind of love is righteous. It will not accept sin and unrighteousness as valid love. So when we are told to love one another (fellow believers) and to love our enemies (unbelievers who oppose us), the kind of love being spoken of is God's righteous love.

Some Christians take the words of John in this letter and try to make them mean that we are to overlook and excuse the sins of fellow believers—or of unbelievers—to prove that we love them. These misguided Christians claim that when we take a stand against sin, we are being hateful. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Love the Person, Not the Sin

Of course, we are not to resort to overt condemnation of individuals, name-calling and insults, or ridicule and harsh bullying. There is a difference between stating that homosexuality is a sin and verbally abusing a gay person. The former pertains to the action, which we are to judge and not participate in. The latter pertains to the individual, whom we are to love as Christ loves, seeking

to bring them into the family of God by faith in Christ, or to restore them to full fellowship if they are believers who have fallen into sin.

We have no business declaring people are bound for hell or verbally insulting them, as some groups do. We are to speak the truth in love and minister the grace of God to them. We are to shine the light of the gospel into their lives.

Likewise, we can stand against abortion, which is infanticide. But we should not call a mother who has aborted her baby a murderer deserving condemnation. Again, we judge the action for what it is, but we love the individual as Christ loves them. Many who have had abortions suffer extreme remorse, guilt, and self-condemnation. To them we should minister the saving grace of God and the blessing of forgiveness and salvation through faith.

Numbers from 2014 show that 54% of abortions are received by women who identify as Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical.¹ This shows that we, as a church, have a problem. Other estimates reflect an increase in that percentage to 68.7%.² It appears that the action of abortion has become socially and religiously acceptable.

Our battle is not to prove the women guilty, but rather to bring conviction to their hearts so they will seek God's forgiveness for their action and be restored to fellowship. And we are to seek the salvation of the unbelieving mothers who abort. But more than that, we should be speaking the truth in love to women who are experiencing unplanned pregnancies and reaching out to them in love with alternatives.

Sadly, according to a Care Net study, the majority of Christian women believe that the church is unprepared to help with decisions about unplanned pregnancy and the options available.³ As a church, we have failed to exhort, edify, instruct, and comfort, as we are commanded to do.

We need to encourage our youth and young adults to wait for sexual intimacy until marriage. We need to discuss from the pulpit the personhood of a pre-born baby in every fetal stage. And we need to be available, with love, to comfort and counsel women of any age with solid information about alternatives like adoption.

If we could make adoption more available by creating ministries for that, the alternative of abortion would be less appealing, especially if women were enveloped in grace, love, and compassion, rather than in condemnation and judgment.

These are just two examples. We could go on with other sins of our culture—pornography, sex trade, lying, gender transitioning, and false accusations (especially in the political realm, where “mud-slinging” has become standard operating procedure). We must always keep in mind that we are to oppose the sin but love the sinner, considering ourselves, lest we also fall into that (or another) sin.

When I was a pre-teen, I vowed, with great hubris, that I would never smoke. By age sixteen I was smoking. By age twenty-one, I smoked nearly three packs a day of an unfiltered cigarette. Fortunately, the Lord intervened, and by age twenty-four I had quit and have not smoked since, by God's grace.

Often, the thing we proudly claim we would never do becomes the thing we do. (See Romans 7:15–17.) That's why it is so important to only judge actions (especially our own) and not people. Moreover, our judgement needs to align with the Word of God, not run counter to it

as politically correct virtue signaling often does, as it “strain[s] out a gnat and swallow[s] a camel!” (Matthew 23:24 MEV).

Paul gives this very warning in Galatians 6:1–2: “Brothers, if a man is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, watching yourselves, lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (MEV).

The Law of Love

Often we think of “love” and the “law” as diametrically opposed. But they are not. Paul writes in Romans 13:10, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law” (NASB). Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8 stress the Old Testament command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18 NLT).

This *law of love* combines six of the Ten Commandments. When the Pharisees asked Jesus which law was most important,

Jesus replied, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”
(Matthew 22:37–40 NLT)

He listed love of God first. That law is given in Deuteronomy 6:5. Various denominations number the Ten Commandments differently. However, the command to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength combines the commandments relating directly to God. We are to have no other God but him. We are not to make idols. We are not to misuse his name. We are to honor the “Sabbath” rest he has provided. (For Israel, that was the seventh day. For us, it is the rest we have in Christ. See Matthew 12:1–12 and Hebrews 4:1–11.)

The *second commandment* he referred to combines all the rest of the Ten Commandments. Those are commands that deal with our relationships with others and our treatment of them. We are to honor our parents, not commit murder, not commit adultery (sex outside of marriage), not steal, not give false witness (libel), and not covet what our neighbor has. This can be worded another way. Jesus spoke this command as “love one another” in John 13:34 and 15:12, 17. We are to love one another—in the body of Christ and in the world.

This kind of love does not compromise with sin. Agape love is not a politically correct *tolerance* of sin. It is neither the celebration of sin nor compromise with sin. Romans 12:9 makes this clear: “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good” (NKJV). God’s love is pure, good, righteous, beneficial, productive, fruitful, and positive.

This love also corrects when correction is needed, just as a loving parent reprimands a wayward or disobedient child. At times, Jesus used what many would call *harsh language* today. (See Matthew 12:34 and 23:27–33.) Even John the Baptist called the hypocritical Pharisees a “brood of snakes” (Matthew 3:7 NLT).

Agape love is sometimes expressed by sharp rebuke. It is not always voiced in sweet tones of affirmation. We will know when to use reproach and when to use courtesy if we are walking in the Spirit and letting the love of God flow through us.

God’s love brings redemption, salvation, deliverance, and sanctification. It produces joy, peace, and hope. And that’s the kind of love that is to be “shed abroad in our hearts” (Romans 5:5 MEV). That’s the kind of love that can speak truth when the culture demands silence.

Endnotes

1. Jenna Jerman, Rachel K. Jones, and Tsuyoshi Onda, “Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes Since 2008,” New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2016, guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014. © Guttmacher Institute. Used by permission. Accessed October 5, 2020.
2. “Abortion Statistics,” Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, ww1.antiochian.org/node/16950. All rights reserved. Used by Permission. Accessed March 23, 2021.
3. Lisa Cannon Green, “New Survey: Women Go Silently from Church to Abortion Clinic,” November 23, 2015, blog, *Care Net* at care-net.org/churches-blog/new-survey-women-go-silently-from-church-to-abortion-clinic. © Care Net. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Accessed October 5, 2020.

Bible Translations

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Review and Reflect

1. Read Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:13–14; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Peter 1:22; and 1 John 4:7–11, 19. Some of these Scriptures focus on loving fellow believers. However, Romans 5:8 tells us that God loved us while we were yet sinners. Are we to love others before or only after they become Christians? Explain.
2. Does the death of Christ, motivated by love, inspire holy living or tolerance and celebration of sin? What does *real* love look like?
3. How do we manifest both God's love and his righteousness when dealing with people who have chosen a lifestyle that is abhorrent to God and disobedient to his Word?
4. If our love toward God and toward others is to increase and abound, do we ever *love enough* for the love to stop growing? How do we experience that continual growth of love?
5. Read Ephesians 3:14–19. With what are we filled when we are “filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19 MEV)?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 16:14; 2 Timothy 2:22; 1 John 3:1, 11, 23; and 2 John 1:5–6. What benefits flow from being established in God's love? What responsibilities?
7. Read 1 Timothy 1:5. Agape love should come from “a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith” (NLT). Is this the kind of love that characterizes the politically correct (PC) culture? Do unbelievers understand this kind of love?
8. What other verses about love can you find from the Old and New Testaments? What do they say about the blessings and benefits of love? What responsibilities do they mention?