



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

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# How Great is the Love?

by Greg Albrecht

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!*  
–1 John 3:1

**T**here's a great story about a little boy who was trying to learn the Lord's Prayer. One night he was kneeling down by his bed, and he prayed: "Our Father who are in heaven, how do you know my name?"

St. Augustine, revered as one of the great theologians of the Christian faith, once said that **Jesus loves each of us as if there was no one else to love.** We can see that reality in the life and teachings of Jesus—time after time we read about people Jesus met who felt and experienced his radically personalized, individual affection—no one they had ever known had talked to them, treated them and took time for

them the way Jesus did.

The eyes out of which Jesus saw and perceived others were never filled with contempt or disdain. Even when Jesus spoke harshly, as he did to religious authorities of his day, he did so out of concern for those authorities and for those who were being oppressed by them—he never spoke harsh words out of hatred or spite.

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# How Great is the Love?

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The little boy trying to learn the Lord's Prayer said something incredibly profound—what kind of love is this love that God has for us that he would be interested in knowing our name? What kind of love is this love that God has for us that he would love us in spite of knowing all there is to know about us?

From time to time I like to consult *The Message Bible*—translated by Eugene Peterson. It's a translation lovingly prepared by Dr. Peterson in an attempt to help us understand the message of the Bible in language that is more familiar to us today. Here's how Dr. Peterson translated 1 John 3:1:

*"What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we are called children of God! That's who we really are. But that's also why the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to."*

The dimensions of God's love for us—its height, depth, width and breadth are staggering. Again, as that little boy said, "Our Father who are in heaven, how do you know my name?"

## What Marvelous Love

1 John 3:1 is one way of expressing our amazement at God's love—that he would stoop down low enough to call us his very own children.

Let me share something Frederic Buechner said in this regard. In his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, Buechner observes: "We are children, perhaps, at the very moment

when we know that it is as children that God loves us—not because we have deserved his love...but simply because he has chosen to love us.

We are children because he is our father; and all of our efforts, fruitful and fruitless, to do good, to speak truth, to understand, are the efforts of children who, for all their precocity, are children still in that before we loved him, he loved us, as children, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

When we talk about God's love, we inevitably will find ourselves at the cross of Christ—the

***When we talk about God's love, we inevitably will find ourselves at the cross of Christ—the greatest singular demonstration of the love of God ...***

greatest singular demonstration of the love of God, when God, in Christ, responded to the hostility and anger of humanity toward Jesus with God's love.

Many within Christendom, regardless of their denomination, misunderstand the cross of Christ and what actually happened.

They have been taught that God the Father was so upset with humanity and our sin that he told Jesus that he would have to come down (from his upstairs bedroom?) here (to the kitchen where we have made a big mess) so that the Father could take out his wrath on him, rather than us.

## Child Abuse?

So people think that God loved us so much that he beat up on his

Son instead of us, and that Jesus, the Son, loved us so much that he took a beating from the Father that we had coming to us.

But take a step back—that description and definition of the cross of Christ is not an act of love, that's an act of retaliation and vengeance.

If God intended to abuse us, as his children, but stopped short and abused the Son of God instead, then we are not talking love, we are talking child abuse.

Some will say, yes, but God's honor and perfection and holiness had been so offended that something had to be done—his good name had been muddied and sullied by humans so that his reputation demanded redemption.

But again, that's not love.

That's retribution—that's God getting his pound of flesh. That idea of the cross is Jesus getting what we deserved because the Father demanded revenge.

That idea of the cross is the old covenant sense of justice—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Suffering for suffering, pain for pain—so that the scales of justice balance.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that God is not primarily interested in balancing the divine scales of justice.

According to the new covenant, God doesn't love us by degree—he doesn't love us in exact proportion to the degree of our suffering and pain. His love is without limit—he doesn't need us to love him back in the same way he loves us because he has all

the love there is.

It's not like God has a finite, limited amount of love—say like million dollars' worth of love—but because so much love has been dispensed the heavenly treasury is in debt, like the indebtedness of the United States, for example.

It's not like God has to raise taxes, or take out the debt on us so that the "love treasury" can be replenished. That's our human mind trying to comprehend God—and we can't humanly comprehend God's love any more than we can stretch our minds to understand his eternity—that he has always been and always will be.

### **Gift Love and Need Love**

1 John 3:1 begins by saying, *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us ..."*

God loves us with what C.S. Lewis calls "Gift Love"—but before we talk about "Gift Love" let's talk about "Need Love"—

and in so doing we might gain a little perspective about the vast differences between human and divine love.

C.S. Lewis says that "Need Love" is born of emptiness.

- **Need Love** sees those objects or persons it values as something it desires and covets to possess.

- **Need Love** tries to appropriate for itself.

- **Need Love** is grasping and greedy—it sucks the very essence out of something or someone to feed its voracious appetite.

There are many times when humans say to another person "I love you" when what they actually mean is that they want to make what the other person is and represents their own, no matter what the consequence may be to that other person.

On the other hand, there is "Gift Love."

- **Gift Love** is divine love—which can be expressed through humans, but only by God's grace, because Gift Love is primarily un-natural for humans. Some

human love, apart from God's grace, might be gift love to some degree—but unadulterated "Gift Love" is a gift of God.

- **Gift Love's** goal is to enhance and enrich another rather than trying to extract value from another.

- **Gift Love** endeavors to increase another rather than to diminish another.

- **Gift Love** is like an artesian well that continuously overflows, while "Need Love" is like a black hole—a vacuum—or a vampire if you like, that sucks dry the very essence of another.

### **Love Without Conditions or Demands**

That's why we often speak of God's love as unconditional love. The cross of Christ was unconditional. The love demonstrated toward all humanity was in spite of the fact that human animosity and hatred was being unleashed against him—so that the loving response of the cross of Christ to the brutality of

humanity was truly, as Jesus taught, turning the other cheek.

The cross of Christ was God saying “I love you” when humanity at large said, “I hate you and I am going to kill you.”

Jesus didn’t demand that we sign a contract before he gave his life—he did what he did out of love without any guarantee that we humans would respond favorably, and love him back.

That’s part of the freedom of God’s love—the grace of God exhibited and demonstrated in his love. God does not force us to do anything—for if force is involved, then by definition, it is not love.

Our relationship with God is not an arranged marriage, where we have no say in the matter—where we are predestined to marry him, no matter what, for what God knows will be “our own good.”

The freedom of God’s love is illustrated in that great parable of the prodigal son—when the father lets the son leave home,

when the father gives him his inheritance even though the father knows the son will waste it away.

The father’s love is illustrated in that he waits for his son to come home—he doesn’t launch an intervention, hiring strongmen to go to that distant country to kidnap his son and bring him home. Of course the father may have reasoned such a kidnapping would have been for his son’s own good—but the father’s love was greater than forcing his son into a particular behavior.

Here’s another quote from Frederic Buechner, from *The Magnificent Defeat*—the same book I quoted earlier:

“Because God’s love is uncoercive and treasures our freedom—if above all he wants us to love him, then we must be left free to love him—we are free to resist it, deny it, crucify it faintly, which we do again and again. This is our terrible freedom, which [God’s] love refuses to overpower so that, in this, the

greatest of all powers, God’s power, is itself powerless.”

God’s love is profound because he refuses to use force or intimidation to make us do what he wants—or even what he knows will be best for us. God’s love is incredible because it makes itself powerless—refusing to use the greatest power in all the universe. That’s exactly what happened at the cross of Christ.

1 John 3:1 lifts and inspires us, challenging us “*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!*”

Desmond Tutu, that great South African Christian, once said the following about God’s love:

“God’s love is like sitting by a fire in the winter—you are just there in front of the fire. You don’t have to be smart or anything. The fire warms you.”

If you are cold, in need of love, God invites you to sit by his fireplace. He will not force you to do so, but there is plenty of room for each one of us by God’s roaring fire of love. □

