



On social media there is a figure who calls himself “God.” I’m not sure who is behind this persona, but I’ll just refer to that person as “he” to make things easy. This person that presents himself as “God” is not a believer. Recently, I saw a meme by “God” that attempted to speak about God’s unconditional love. It went something like this: “God loves you unconditionally, under certain conditions.” I’m paraphrasing, but you get the idea. Since “God’s” memes seem intelligent and witty, many people think they speak the truth. It is not uncommon for the most confident and cynical voice to be accepted as right.

Once I saw this meme, I felt compelled to challenge it. A friend of my posted it who happens to be an atheist. I’ve always been one to speak my mind. Granted, most of my life I’ve done it poorly, but I’ve been working on humility, charity, and developing wisdom. Whereas, I used to want to put someone in their place, now I desire to teach and clarify. It’s something I’m going to have to work on the rest of my life. Today, I want to talk about why “God’s” meme misses the point. He thinks he understands the One True God, but as is often the case with non-believers, he reduces God down to merely a human invention.

About the closest you get to truly, fully understanding unconditional love is through parenthood. I love my children unconditionally. I tell them all the time that there is nothing they could ever do to make me stop loving them. I also tell them that there is nothing they could do to make me love them more—they can’t win my love, they will always have it. I love them totally, fully, and as completely as I can as a fallen human.

Now, I do understand that there are some parents who do claim to love their children unconditionally, but when it comes down to it, their love seems conditional. They shower

more love if their kid is making them look good or impressing them. They withdraw love if their kid embarrasses them or goes down a path with which they don't agree. Most parents, however, do love their kids unconditionally.

But, what does this mean? Does it mean that I have blind tolerance of anything or everything my children do? No, it doesn't. To truly love someone, you want what is best for them. In Catholic theological language, we describe authentic love as willing the good of another. For example, let's say one of my kids decides to travel down a path that is immoral or illegal. Should I as their parent just stand by and do nothing? Would it be wrong of me to try to draw them out of a dangerous lifestyle? No, it wouldn't. It would be completely unloving of me to stand by and do nothing. It would be even worse if I encouraged them. If someone is engaging in something that prevents them from being the best version of themselves, love moves us to try to reach out.

Here again our culture creates a false dichotomy. You have two choices: You can say you love me, but that means you have to accept and tolerate everything I do OR If you dare to call me out on something that means you don't really love me unconditionally. As always, there is another choice. I CAN love someone unconditionally and will their good, which may mean I work to encourage them to be their best. It may mean I criticize a behavior or belief system because I don't see it bringing out the best in them. They may not want to hear what I have to say, but it doesn't follow that I don't love them. What this dichotomy is, is a guilt trip. It is a tactic used to illicit guilt to make one feel bad. It's meant to silence.

"Oh, you don't agree with everything I do, well, you must not really love me." What usually happens is the concerned person capitulates and retreats to avoid being labeled "unloving," thus justifying in the other's mind that they are right and so they continue down an unhealthy path. I've also noticed that those that demand unconditional love, rarely are willing to offer that kind of love to those that disagree with them. They want it for themselves, but they don't necessarily want to reciprocate the gift.

Have you ever noticed that when people say, "This is just who I am" that it never follows defending a virtuous characteristic? It always follows in defense of some concerning behavior or belief. The underlying message is: I'm not going to ever change and you better just accept me. When I was five, I stole a lot and I knew it was wrong because I hid my stolen goods. Can you imagine in an effort to love me unconditionally, my parents just accepting that I was a thief? "Well, this is just who you are and I guess to love you, I just have to accept this part of you." This would be awful and dangerous. It is precisely

because my parents love me unconditionally that they willed better for my life. They knew that being a thief was not good for me and they didn't want to see me go down that path. Had they acquiesced to my life choices, I might have continued on that path and planted myself in jail thereby severely hurting my future. My parents willed my good and thank God for it.

This is how God loves. He loves each one of us. He loves every person that has been, that is, and will be. **He loves us all no matter how we've sinned or how we've turned away.** He proved that love by sending His Son to die for us and offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. You have to really let that sink in: God the Son died for us, though we don't deserve it and redeemed us through His sacrifice. For our part, we do have to accept this gift and desire a relationship with Him. And even if we don't accept the gift and we turn our backs, God still loves us. It's hard for us to fully comprehend His unconditionally love, because as humans we lack the capacity to love perfectly. We know that we fail, at times, to truly love unconditionally and sometimes we tack our inadequacies onto God. God lacks nothing, He is Love itself and, hard though it may be to wrap our minds around, He loves each one of us unconditionally.

**God created each one of us for a reason. We have a purpose. Many times, we choose our own path which is fraught with selfishness, egotism, and indulgence.** Following our own path ultimately leads to unhappiness and a lost sense of purpose. Our purpose in life isn't to just focus on our wants, turning inward. God has much bigger plans for us and often times those plans draw us out of our selfish ways. God's plan for our life can leave us uncomfortable, but it is always rewarding and fulfilling. A lot of times, we don't want to hear the plans God has for us, because we fear what it will mean. It always means that we will have to struggle to give up some sin that we enjoy. Make no mistake, we enjoy the sins we engage in otherwise we wouldn't engage in them. We know deep down that surrendering our life to God will mean laying down those things that may give us temporary pleasure. We struggle to imagine that God will supply something better and so we cling to our ways and claim "this is just who I am." We don't want to change. We resist God's love which always calls us to a higher existence. He wants more for us than we can possibly imagine and all He wants is the chance to help us grow into who He created us to be. Unconditionally love never settles for less, it always encourages growth.

When my husband and I were first married, I was a very impatient person. I, also, allowed my anger to get the best of me in numerous situations. My husband tried to

guide me to let go of those bad parts of myself. At first, I resisted him and threw out the whole, "This is just who I am, love it or leave it" schtick. It was I, however, who was being unloving. I was unwilling to let go of habits and behaviors that hurt or harmed not only others, but myself, as well. My husband, because he loves me, wanted to see me become better. In fact, he knew I could be better. Eventually, I listened to him and had to face myself and who I had become. It was hard. But, because I love my husband and my kids and, yes, even because I love myself, I worked to change. I don't want to just settle for what makes me comfortable or what is easy. My husband still loved me when I was angry and impatient, but he knew my actions were unbecoming.

God operates in this way. He loves us no matter our condition in life, but He will always seek to draw us to the person He created us to be. For this, I am grateful. I am grateful that God loves me enough to forgive me each time I mess up and ask for forgiveness. I am grateful that He is merciful and understands our hearts even better than we do. I'm grateful that He envisions me as even better than what I envision for myself. And I'm grateful that even if I turn my back and seek to do things my way, He loves me enough to pursue me and call me back.

We all know the story of the prodigal son in the Bible. A man has two sons and he loves them both deeply. One day the younger one asks for his inheritance and splits. The dad respects his free will, even though you know that he doesn't agree with what the son is doing. Off he goes to live a life of indulgence, greed, and selfishness. You can imagine that the father begged him not to go down this path before he left. You can also imagine that while the son was off living an immoral life that the dad was at home sick with worry and loving him all the same. Finally, the son realizes that his path is void of any real happiness and he desires to go home. He knows that he did wrong by his dad and he seeks forgiveness and the dad gives it. He welcomes the son back home and rejoices that his son decided to return to his love.

There's a reason that Jesus told this parable and it speaks to the heart of everything I've tried to say.