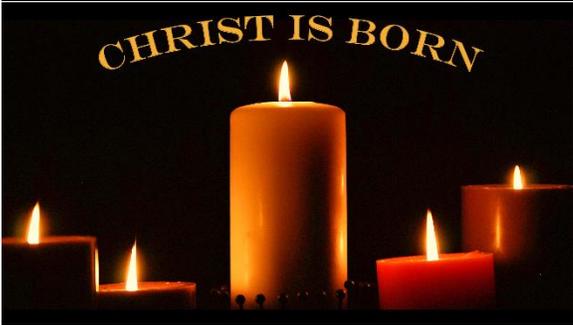




Merry Christmas



VIDEO: AMY GRANT



We'll start with something fun...



VIDEO: KID'S NARRATION



VIDEO: COME AND WORSHIP



VIDEO: TWO ASK "WHY?"

Why? They did a pretty good job answering the question in the 3 minutes allotted to them in the video and they concluded that the reason... the reason that the One through Whom the physical universe was created came as a helpless baby, 2,026 years ago, to poor Jewish parents in a Bethlehem stable... was YOU.

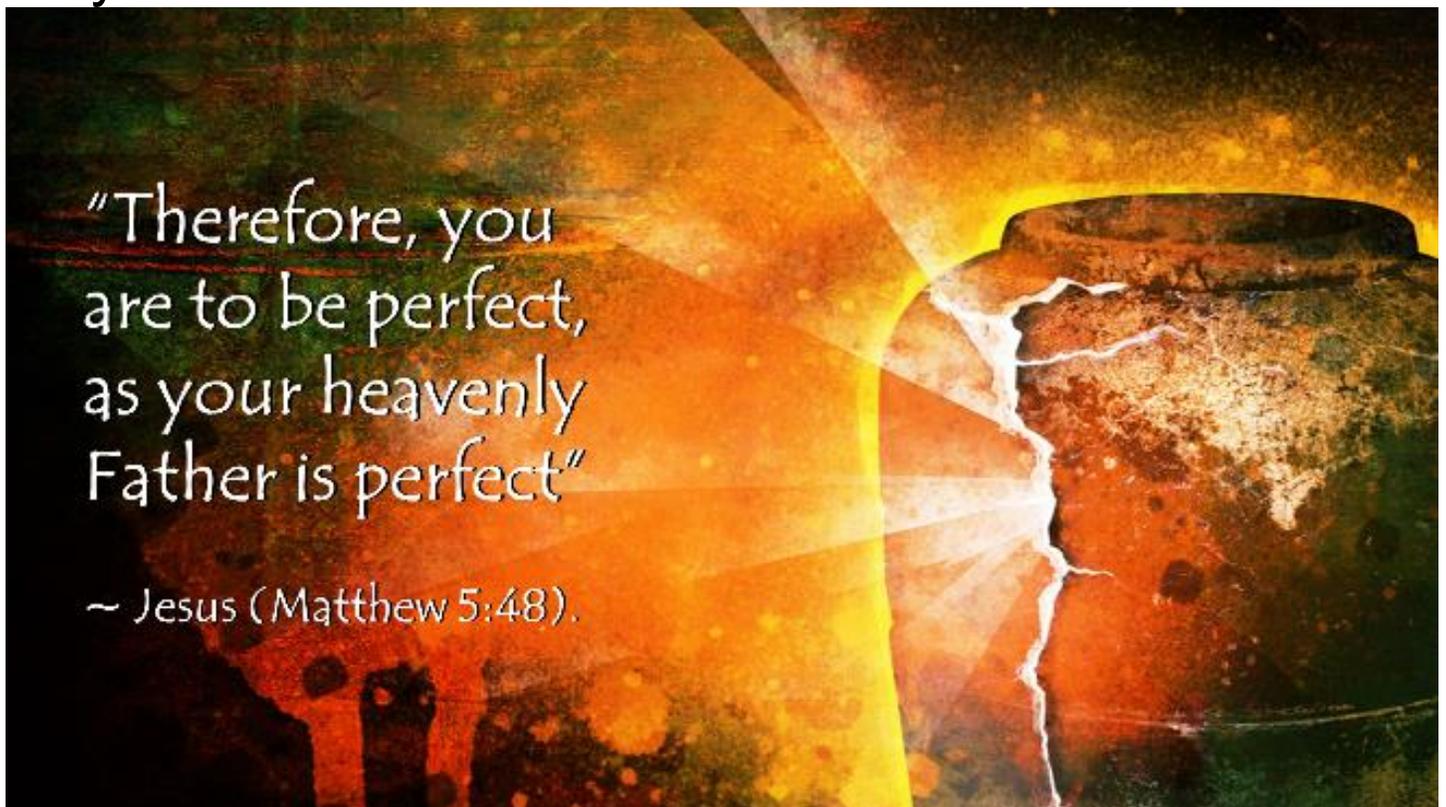


As we saw yesterday, the God, who literally spoke everything that we know, experience, and are, into

existence and Who actively holds it all together by the Word of His power (Hebrews 1:1-3) came for you.

If you're Biblically savvy, that might not seem exactly right because while it answers the question "why did Jesus come," it creates an even bigger question "why you?"

I mean, granted, I think that you're great, but it's a little far-fetched to think that the Creator, Who holds the universe in His hand, would come as a helpless baby for you – doesn't it?



*"Therefore, you
are to be perfect,
as your heavenly
Father is perfect"*

~ Jesus (Matthew 5:48).

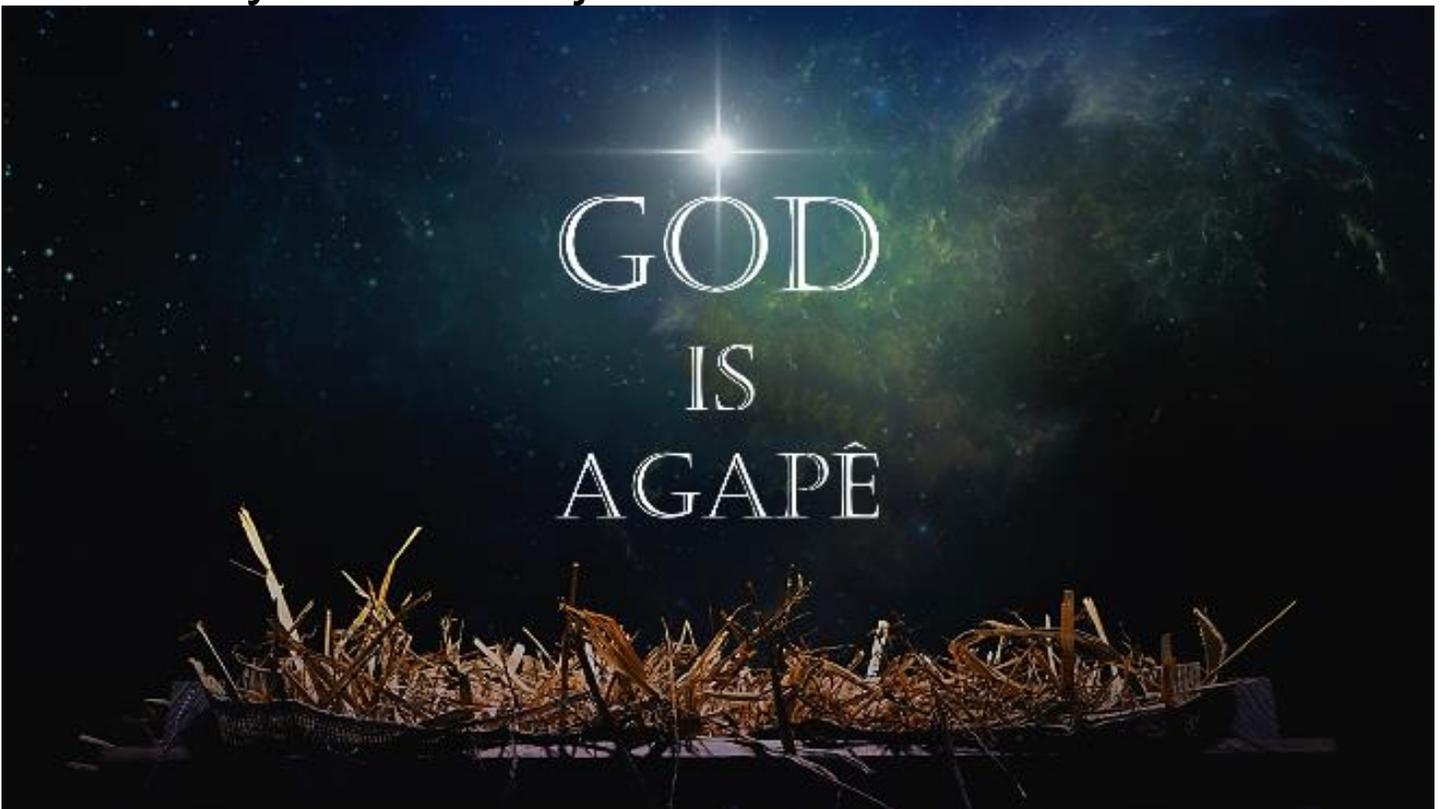
If you have an honest bone in your body, you'll readily admit that you are far from perfect. God, however, is

perfect, the standard in Heaven is perfection. When thinking about going to Heaven, people compare themselves to other people, but nowhere is that said to be the criterion. To get into Heaven, one must compare themselves with God – He’s the measure for Heaven. The Bible confirms that, Jesus telling us plainly that, we must be perfect to enter into Heaven. Well, we’re not even close and that’s what the Bible means when it says in Psalm 143:2, “no man living is righteous.” When it so frequently confirms that “no one is good, no not one” (Psalm 14:3, 53:3, Matthew 19:17, Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19, Romans 3:10-12). When Romans 3:23 declares “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

We know that we are not good, righteous, or perfect, enough that God would do that for us alone, and so we say, that Jesus came for the plural you – not you singly, but you as part of a group. It’s a dumb argument. If Jesus wasn’t going to come for one imperfect person, adding a whole bunch more imperfect people to the pot doesn’t make it better – it makes it worse.

The theological concept is what I mentioned last night that God came to us, as one of us, because that’s His nature, or His character – it’s simply Who He is. The

two different ideas, God being born a man for you and Him doing it due to His nature are not so far apart as they seem. They are related, and that's why I played the video. The way the two things are related is the character of God that drove Him to come, is love and love always has an object.



You guessed it, that object is you. The object of God's love is, in actual fact, little ole you. There is a human focused saying that if you were the only person that God could Save, He still would have done it all the very same way – that He would have come just for you alone. It's actually true, because regardless of the results, even if no one could be Saved, God's character would have still moved Him to act the way

that He did. That's how the theological and the personal are related.

What is this God love? Well, in a word, Agapê. We've talked about it so frequently I won't belabor it today, except to remind you that it is a love that is unconditioned.

Unconditional love means that it is a love for another not conditioned by their lovability. Not conditioned by their behavior. Not conditioned by their performance. Not conditioned by their value, not conditioned by their potential. How can someone love another without conditions? It is a choice. God chooses to love you based upon His character not yours.

God loves everyone. God came, and God sacrificed, for everyone... Do you agree? Here's where I may offend you – please stick with me... It includes Adolf Hitler and his ilk. That seems outrageous to us – it's utterly shocking that someone like Hitler could be loved by a holy and good God.

If the notion of it tweaks you even a little, consider this... What's the fundamental difference between you and Hitler, other than circumstances and degree? We

always want justice to be served on others, while we expect mercy to be lavished upon us. I'm not saying that Hitler wasn't as evil as he was, I'm saying we are far more evil than we admit. If you're having trouble with this concept, may I suggest that you carefully read about Jonah.

So, yes, according to the Bible, God so loved the world that He gave up what was most precious to Him, the very Word of God to become the one and only fully satisfactory sacrifice for sin for all sin – “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:1, 1:29, 3:16). Because of Jesus, eternal life will be granted by God to anyone and everyone who believes in Jesus.

While God loves every person regardless of their performance, that caveat, “believes in Him,” does set a boundary of sorts. Seemingly, a condition upon unconditional love.

It's not, it's not a condition for God giving His love, it's a condition created by the relational nature of love itself, a boundary on the other's ability to receive God's love.



As already pointed out, love always has an object and that means that love is always relational. It is why God created us. Relationships, by definition, cannot be one-sided affairs. It really does take two to tango. For love given to be effective it must be accepted by the object. The object must accept the gift, and, in the case of love, the gift really is the giver. Jesus gave Himself, to accept His gift is to accept Him for Who He is – it is to believe in Him.

You could say that while love is unconditional, the relationship it seeks to create is conditional.

Why must it be so, why must the object accept God's love poured out through Jesus? Because God will not coerce a choice to accept Him.

We could debate the mechanics of it, but the bottom line is that each person must choose freely, at least from their perspective, to enter into the relationship offered as a result of the kind of gift Agapê is, or the entire exercise is a manipulation masquerading as love.

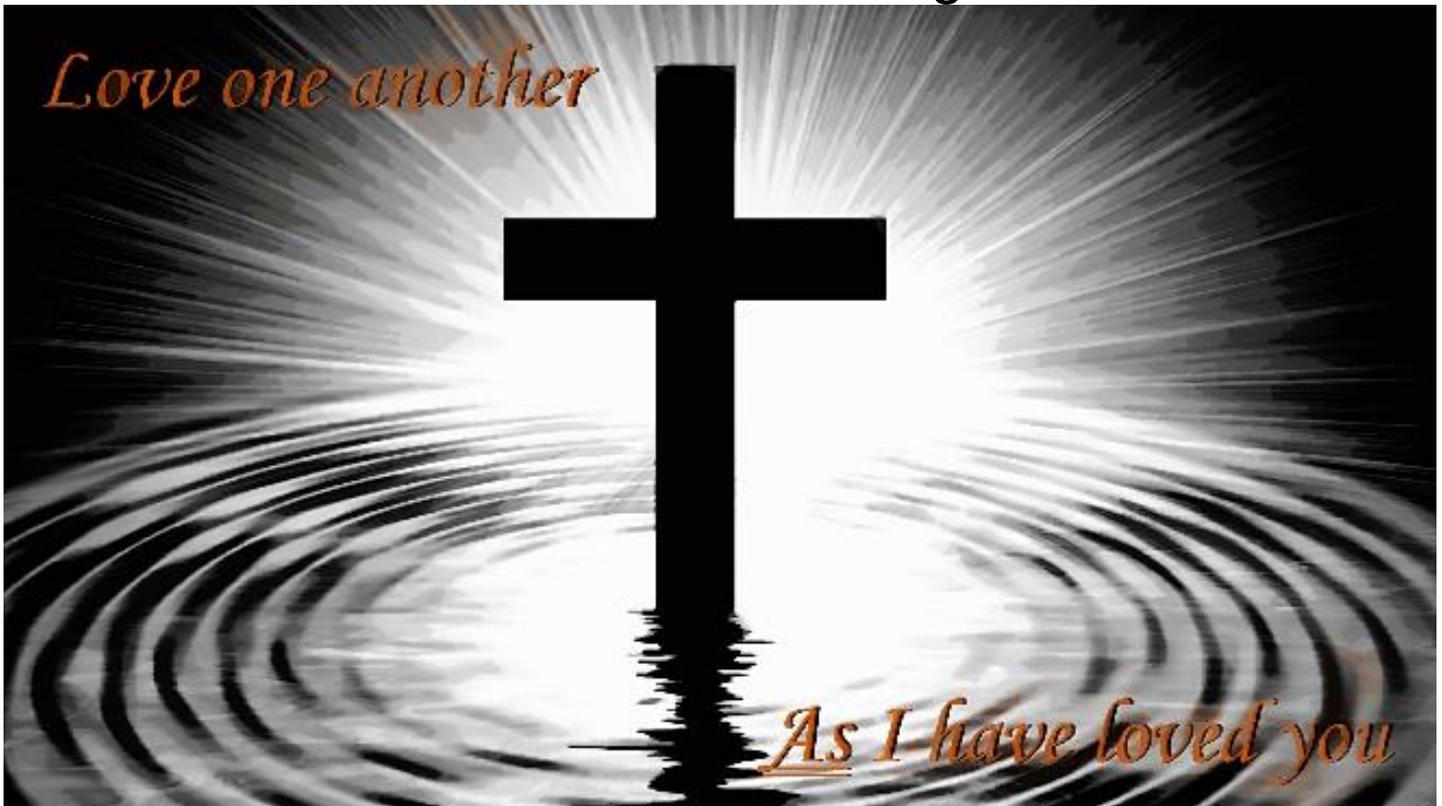
Biblically, God has opened His door wide to relationship by loving us first. In order to enter through that relationship door, and make His gift effective for us, we must want that relationship waiting on the other side – that's the boundary set by the nature of the offer.



Now, I know this is all old hat to you, but riddle with me a bit further. We've been talking about belief, Salvific Belief, for quite a while. We talked about how true Biblical belief must be significant enough that it would persevere come whatever may. Serious enough that it would be in the actual Jesus, not some caricature of Him. Sincere enough that it would be life altering for us.

That's one of the many ways to say that truly believing in Him is so much more than a simple acknowledgment. Let's use Agapê to see it from a different angle.

Jesus commanded that we Agapê each another. Yes, that means that the Lord orders that we love each other without conditions. Then Jesus declared that it was that very thing, our supernatural love for one another, that was His shining beacon of Truth and Light in this depraved and darkened world, as well as the very proof that we are truly His. I'm not sure why we have such a hard time understanding this.



The command, John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." In case anyone wanted to split hairs on whether Agapê really means to love unconditionally, we are specifically to love the way Jesus loved. Jesus gave up everything for

love. We are to love precisely the way that He loves. That means without qualification and therefore selflessly and, when necessary, self-sacrificingly.

I Corinthians 11:26, tells us that when we come together in a church setting and celebrate the One Who unifies us as brothers and sisters in Him, we proclaim His death until He returns. It is our common foundation and Source in Christ that declares to the world His Salvation-enabling sacrifice.

Then Jesus plainly taught in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Unconditional, altruistic, God-love for people far less perfect than you. Now, we know why we need the Holy Spirit within us.

How can I love in that way? Well, let's start with what prevents us from jumping in with both feet. What is it that prevents you from loving all others unconditionally as the Lord our God does? In a word, it is fear. Fear of being embarrassed and rejected, fear of being used and abused, fear of being misunderstood and hurt. It's

a real concern. I'm certain that Jesus would confirm the dangers.

Yes, to love as He loved, will cost. To love without cost is not Agapê; it's never Agapê. It is the self-serving, ever-fickle, thing our self-absorbed culture calls love, but it isn't anything remotely like God's Love. Think about it, when what we call love gets hard, we quit, at least to some degree. I can love someone with absolute abandon one minute and have an entirely different feeling regarding that same person a short time later. Whatever that is, it's not Agapê.

So, there is always a price you pay to Agapê another – always. Beyond that though we are never called upon to pretend in Christianity. Hypocrisy is for non-Christians, never for a child of the Living God. That means that we must be honest.



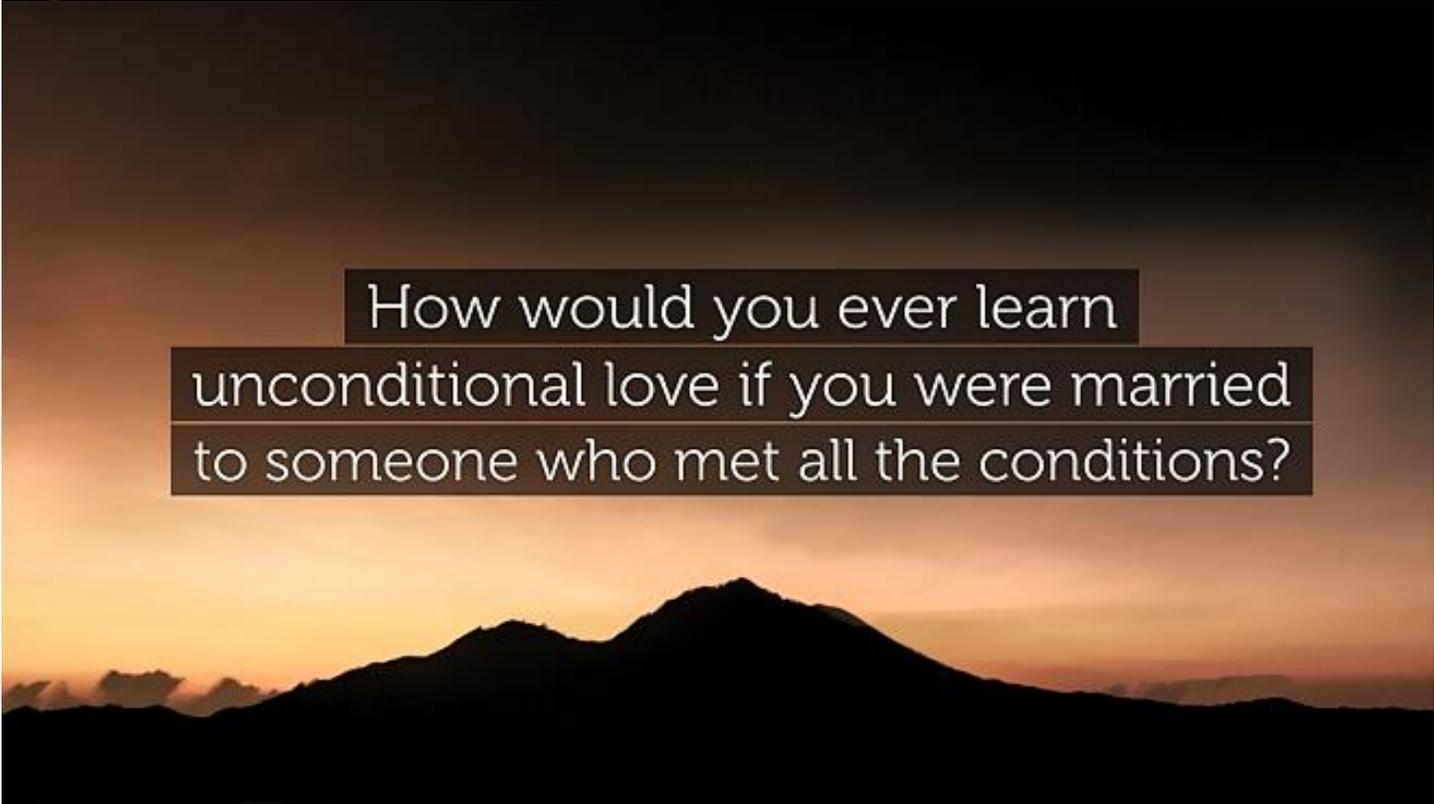
This is not a condition we get to set concerning our love for another; this is the same consequence of Agapê that exists as a result of it being relational – of it being given and necessitating a response. Like we were talking about last week, when you offer a no-strings-attached gift to someone you force them to make a choice. They must accept or reject. Agapê, being unconditional love freely given, is such a gift. In fact, it is “the gift.” A gift that, by its nature, must be embraced for it to create the right relationship intended. That’s the boundary we saw before.

Just to make sure we understand, I can give you a gun and you can accept it and then you can walk away

from me, and the gift can still serve its purpose – it can still have its intended effect.

Not so with Agapê. It is a gift of one's own self relationally to another. If I give it and you accept it, and you walk away from me, the gift has not served its purpose – it cannot have its intended effect. That's the natural consequence of that type of gift – the condition for it to be effective.

That's where honesty comes into play beyond the honesty of the gift itself. The condition is being honest about whether the other person has accepted or rejected what has been offered to them.



How would you ever learn
unconditional love if you were married
to someone who met all the conditions?

An example is in order. Let's say that a man loves a woman and wants to serve her for the rest of his life. He spends what to him is a fortune buying her a beautiful and extremely valuable ring. He takes her to a wonderful dinner and finds just the right time to get down on one knee and gives her that extraordinary ring. By lovingly giving her everything that he is, symbolized by the expensive ring, he has forced her to choose.

No amount of hem-hawing around will change the fact that a decision, and a fairly quick one at that, is required by the situation. A delay is a no. Now, it's true that she may ask for some time to think. That she may go and weigh her options and then decide that a better offer is unlikely and so accept, but it was really a no. Statistically it should have remained a no.

That's what living together without a piece of paper from the state is all about. It's a way to play house, get the benefits of marriage without the commitment and thereby keeping your options open in case someone better comes around. In the case of our spurned proposer, He can still love her unconditionally, but he needs to be honest about the absence of reciprocity and adjust his behavior accordingly.

What Agapê means is that we are to love the other person regardless of their lovability, because anyone without the indwelling Holy Spirit can love a lovable person. We must love the unlovable people, according to Jesus. Within that love is also honesty – Truth. If the other refuses our gift, or worse abuses our gift, we must be honest about that fact.

It's really like the worn-out cliché, "Love the sinner, not the sin." I could give endless examples and still wouldn't cover a particular condition that you might encounter. That's why Christianity is about principles and not about rules.

The point is that when you love as you're commanded you will open yourself up to all kinds of crazy situations. In each case you must prayerfully and carefully navigate that relationship guided by your love for them and honesty about both your attitude and behavior, as well as their attitude and behavior and therefore about the health of your relationship with them and adjust your behavior accordingly. It's called integrity.

If you walk out your Christianity with integrity. That means with the most genuine love and honesty God

can muster through you, the people who accept your gift, especially over the course of time, will be genuine accepters and those who do not accept your gift, especially over time, will become evident as well – they will fall away from you.

Love regardless, conduct yourself with integrity, allow others to do them, and respond appropriately to their choices regarding you – be like Jesus.



One final thought for you to consider... Forgiveness. Jesus told us in teaching us how to pray that in order to be forgiven, we must likewise forgive. Is that another requirement? We have to love and now we have to forgive too?!?!

The reason forgiving others is a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness from God is that it is part and parcel to Agapê. It is Agapê in action.

The weak person refuses to forgive.

The selfish person forgives in order to improve their mental health.

The religious person forgives in order to receive God's forgiveness.

The obedient Christian forgives because that's what they are commanded to do.

The savvy Christian forgives because they recognize how much they have been forgiven.

The mature Christian filled with God's Spirit forgives because they have become like God. Food for thought.



VIDEO: COME ALL YE

