

Does God Love Whom He Does Not Save?

October 3rd, 2007

(By John MacArthur)

I realize that most of our readers will have no objection whatsoever to the idea that God's love is universal. Most of us were weaned on this notion, being taught as children to sing songs like, "Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world." Many may never even have encountered anyone who denies that God's love is universal.

Yet if I might take a moment to dwell on this issue, it is because I want to acknowledge that it poses a perplexing difficulty for other aspects of God's revealed truth. Let us honestly admit that on the face of it, the universal love of God is hard to reconcile with the doctrine of election.

Election is a biblical doctrine, affirmed with the utmost clarity from beginning to end in Scripture. The highest expression of divine love to sinful humanity is seen in the fact that God set His love on certain undeserving sinners and chose them for salvation before the foundation of the world. There is a proper sense in which God's love for His own is a unique, special, particular love determined to save them at all costs.

It is also true that when Scripture speaks of divine love, the focus is usually on God's eternal love toward the elect. God's love for mankind reaches fruition in the election of those whom He saves. And not every aspect of divine love is extended to all sinners without exception. Otherwise, all would be elect, and all would ultimately be saved. But Scripture clearly teaches that many will not be saved (Matt. 7:22–23). Can God sincerely love those whom He does not intervene to save?

British Baptist leader Erroll Hulse, dealing with this very question, has written,

How can we say God loves all men when the psalms tell us He hates the worker of iniquity (Ps. 5:5)? How can we maintain that God loves all when Paul says that He bears the objects of His wrath, being fitted for destruction, with great patience (Rom. 9:22)? Even more how can we possibly accept that God loves all men without exception when we survey the acts of God's wrath in history? Think of the deluge which destroyed all but one family. Think of Sodom and Gomorrah. With so specific a chapter as Romans [1,] which declares that sodomy is a sign of reprobation, could we possibly maintain that God loved the population of the two cities destroyed by fire? How can we possibly reconcile God's love and His wrath? Would we deny the profundity of this problem? (Erroll Hulse, "The Love of God for All Mankind," *Reformation Today* [Nov–Dec 1983], 18–19).

Yet Hulse realizes that if we take Scripture at face value, there is no escaping the conclusion that God's love extends even to sinners whom He ultimately will condemn. "The will of God is expressed in unmistakable terms," Hulse writes. "He has no pleasure in the destruction and punishment of the wicked" (Ez. 18:32; 33:11). Hulse also cites Matthew 23:37, where Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem, then says, "We are left in no doubt that the desire and will of God is for man's highest good, that is his eternal salvation through heeding the gospel of Christ." (Ibid., 21–22)

It is crucial that we accept the testimony of Scripture on this question, for as Hulse points out,

We will not be disposed to invite wayward transgressors to Christ, or reason with them, or bring to them the overtures of the gospel, unless we are convinced that God is favorably disposed to them. Only if we are genuinely persuaded that He will have them to be saved are we likely to make the effort. If God does not love them it is hardly



A Scene from
Pilgrim's Progress

likely that we will make it our business to love them. Especially is this the case when there is so much that is repulsive in the ungodliness and sinfulness of Christ-rejecters. (Ibid., 18)

Biblically, we cannot escape the conclusion that God's benevolent, merciful love is unlimited in extent. He loves the whole world of humanity. This love extends to all people in all times. It is what Titus 3:4 refers to as "the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind." God's singular love for the elect quite simply does not rule out a universal love of sincere compassion—and a sincere desire on God's part to see every sinner turn to Christ.

Mark 10 relates a familiar story that illustrates God's love for the lost. It is the account of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and began asking Him a great question: "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Scripture tells us:

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother' " (vv. 18–19).

Every aspect of Jesus' reply was designed to confront the young man's sin. Many people misunderstand the point of Jesus' initial question: "Why do you call Me good?" Our Lord was not denying His own sinlessness or deity. Plenty of verses of Scripture affirm that Jesus was indeed sinless—"holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). He is therefore also God incarnate (Jn. 1:1). But Jesus' reply to this young man had a twofold purpose: first, to underscore His own deity, confronting the young man with the reality of who He was; and second, to gently chide a brash young man who clearly thought of himself as good.

To stress this second point, Jesus quoted a section of the Decalogue. Had the young man been genuinely honest with himself, he would have had to admit that he had not kept the law perfectly. But instead, he responded confidently, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up" (v. 20). This was unbelievable impertinence on the young man's part. It shows how little he understood of the demands of the law. Contrast his flippant response with how Peter reacted when he saw Christ for who He was. Peter fell on his face and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Lk. 5:8). This rich young ruler's response fell at the other end of the spectrum. He was not even willing to admit he had sinned.

So Jesus gave him a second test: "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mk. 10:21).

Sadly, the young man declined. Here were two things he refused to do: he would not acknowledge his sin, and he would not bow to Christ's lordship. In other words, he shut himself off from the eternal life he seemed so earnestly to be seeking. As it turned out, there were things more important to him than eternal life, after all. His pride and his personal property took priority in his heart over the claims of Christ on his life. And so he turned away from the only true Source of the life he thought he was seeking.

That is the last we ever see of this man in the New Testament. As far as the biblical record is concerned, he remained in unbelief. But notice this significant phrase, tucked away in Mark 10:21: "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him." Here we are explicitly told that Jesus loved an overt, open, non-repentant, non-submissive Christ-rejector. He loved him.

God's Love for Those Never Saved

October 4th, 2007

(By John MacArthur)



Dante and Virgil at the Gates of Hell

Note: This is a continuation from yesterday's post. This two-part series was adapted from The God Who Loves, published by Thomas Nelson.

Yesterday we ended by looking at the Rich Young Ruler in Mark 10. But that's not the only Scripture that speaks of God's love for those who turn away from Him. In Isaiah 63:7–9 the prophet describes God's demeanor toward the nation of Israel:

“I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has granted them according to His compassion, and according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses. For He said, ‘Surely, they are My people, Sons who will not deal falsely.’ So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them; and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.”

Someone might say, Yes, but that talks about God's redemptive love for His elect alone. No, this speaks of a love that spread over the entire nation of Israel. God “became their Savior” in the sense that He redeemed the entire nation from Egypt. He suffered when they suffered. He sustained them “all the days of old.” This speaks not of

an eternal salvation, but of a temporal relationship with an earthly nation. How do we know? Look at verse 10: “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.”

That is an amazing statement! Here we see God defined as the Savior, the lover, the redeemer of a people who make themselves His enemies. They rebel against Him. They grieve His Holy Spirit. They choose a life of sin.

Now notice verse 17: “Why, O Lord, dost Thou cause us to stray from Thy ways, and harden our heart from fearing Thee?” That speaks of God's judicial hardening of the disobedient nation. He actually hardened the hearts of those whom He loved and redeemed out of Egypt.

Isaiah 64:5 includes these shocking words: “Thou wast angry, for we sinned, we continued in them a long time; and shall we be saved?”

How can God be Savior to those who will not be saved? Yet these are clearly unconverted people. Look at verses 6–7, which begins with a familiar passage:

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. And there is no one who calls on Thy name, who arouses himself to take hold of Thee; for Thou hast hidden Thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

These are clearly unconverted, unbelieving people. In what sense can God call Himself their Savior?

Here is the sense of it: God revealed Himself as Savior. He manifested His love to the nation. “In all their affliction He was afflicted” (63:9). He poured out His goodness, and lovingkindness and mercy on the nation. And that divine forbearance and longsuffering should have moved them to repentance (Rom. 2:4). But instead they responded with unbelief, and their hearts were hardened.

Isaiah 65 takes it still further:

I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, “Here am I, here am I,” To a nation which did not call on My name. I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts. (vv.1–2)

In other words, God turned away from these rebellious people, consigned them to their own idolatry, and chose a people for Himself from among other nations.

Isaiah reveals the shocking blasphemy of those from whom God has turned away. They considered themselves holier than God (v. 5); they continually provoked Him to His face (v. 3), defiling themselves (v. 4) and scorning God for idols (v. 7). God judged them with the utmost severity, because their hostility to Him was great, and their rejection of Him was final.

Yet these were people on whom God had showered love and goodness! He even called Himself their Savior.

In a similar sense Jesus is called “Savior of the world” (Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14). Paul wrote, “We have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (1 Tim. 4:10). The point is not that He actually saves the whole world (for that would be universalism, and Scripture clearly teaches that not all will be saved). The point is that He is the only Savior to whom anyone in the world can turn for forgiveness and eternal life—and therefore, all are urged to embrace Him as Savior. Jesus Christ is proffered to the world as Savior. In setting forth His own Son as Savior of the world, God displays the same kind of love to the whole world that was manifest in the Old Testament to the rebellious Israelites. It is a sincere, tender-hearted, compassionate love that offers mercy and forgiveness.

The Universal Grace of God

October 8th, 2007

(By John MacArthur)

In light of all the comments last week about God’s love for those never saved, we wanted to continue the discussion by examining the question: In what sense is God’s love universal? What aspects of God’s love and goodwill are seen even in His dealings with the reprobate?

There are at least four ways that God’s love is manifest universally to all people. Today we will consider the first.

Common Grace

Common grace is a term theologians use to describe the goodness of God to all mankind universally. Common grace restrains sin and the effects of sin on the human race. Common grace is what keeps humanity from descending into the morass of evil that we would see if the full expression of our fallen nature were allowed to have free reign.

Scripture teaches that we are totally depraved—tainted with sin in every aspect of our being (Rom. 3:10–18). People who doubt this doctrine often ask, “How can people who are supposedly totally depraved enjoy beauty, have a sense of right and wrong, know the pangs of a wounded conscience, or produce great works of art and literature? Aren’t these accomplishments of humanity proof that the human race is essentially good? Don’t these things testify to the basic goodness of human nature?”

And the answer is no. Human nature is utterly corrupt. “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9). Unregenerate men and women are “dead in ... trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). All people are by nature “foolish ... disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various



lusts and pleasures, spending [their lives] in malice” (Titus 3:3). This is true of all alike, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

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Common grace is all that restrains the full expression of human sinfulness. God has graciously given us a conscience, which enables us to know the difference between right and wrong, and to some degree places moral constraints on evil behavior (Rom. 2:15). He sovereignly maintains order in human society through government (Rom. 13:1–5). He enables us to admire beauty and goodness (Ps. 50:2). He imparts numerous advantages, blessings, and tokens of His kindness on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). All of those things are the result of common grace, God’s goodness to mankind in general.

Common grace *ought* to be enough to move sinners to repentance. The apostle Paul rebukes the unbeliever: “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). Yet because of the depth of depravity in the human heart, all sinners spurn the goodness of God.

Common grace does not pardon sin or redeem sinners, but it is nevertheless a sincere token of God’s goodwill to mankind in general. As the apostle Paul said, “In Him we live and move and exist ... for we also are His offspring” (Acts 17:28). That takes in everyone on earth, not just those

whom God adopts as sons. God deals with us all as His offspring, people made in His image. “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9).

If you question the love and goodness of God to all, look again at the world in which we live. Someone might say, “There’s a lot of sorrow in this world.” The only reason the sorrow and tragedy stand out is because there is also much joy and gladness. The only reason we recognize the ugliness is that God has given us so much beauty. The only reason we feel the disappointment is that there is so much that satisfies.

When we understand that all of humanity is fallen and rebellious and unworthy of any blessing from God’s hand, it helps give a better perspective. “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:22, NIV). And the only reason God ever gives us anything to laugh at, smile at, or enjoy is because He is a good and loving God. If He were not, we would be immediately consumed by His wrath.

Acts 14 contains a helpful description of common grace. Here Paul and Barnabas were ministering at Lystra, when Paul healed a lame man. The crowds saw it and someone began saying that Paul was Zeus and Barnabas was Hermes. The priest at the local temple of Zeus wanted to organize a sacrifice to Zeus. But when Paul and Barnabas heard about it, they said,

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. *And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness* (vv. 15–17, emphasis added).

That is a fine description of common grace. While allowing sinners to “go their own ways,” God nevertheless bestows on them temporal tokens of His goodness and lovingkindness. It is not saving grace. It has no redemptive effect. Nevertheless, it is a genuine and unfeigned manifestation of divine lovingkindness to all people.

[Pity the Fool\(s\)](#)

October 9th, 2007

(By John MacArthur)

Yesterday we considered God's love for all mankind as seen in common grace. Today we will look at the compassion He has for the whole world.



Compassion

God's love to all humanity is a love of *compassion*. To say it another way, it is a love of pity. It is a broken-hearted love. He is "good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon [Him]" (Ps. 86:5). "To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him" (Dan. 9:9). He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Exod. 34:6).

Again, we must understand that there is nothing in any sinner that compels God's love. He does not love us because we are lovable. He is not merciful to us because we in any way deserve His mercy. We are despicable, vile sinners who if we are not saved by the grace of God will be thrown on the trash heap of eternity, which is hell. We have no intrinsic value, no intrinsic worth—there's nothing in us to love.

I recently overheard a radio talk-show psychologist attempting to give a caller an ego-boost: "God loves you for what you are. You *must* see yourself as someone special. After all, you are special to God."

But that misses the point entirely. God *does not* love us "for what we are." He loves us *in spite of what we are*. He does not love us because we are special. Rather, it is only His love and grace that give our lives any significance at all. That may seem like a doleful perspective to those raised in a culture where self-esteem is elevated to the supreme virtue. But it is, after all, precisely what Scripture teaches: "We have sinned like our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have behaved wickedly" (Ps. 106:6). "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isa. 64:6).

God loves because He is love; love is essential to who He is. Rather than viewing His love as proof of something worthy in us, we ought to be humbled by it.

God's love for the reprobate is not the love of value; it is the love of pity for that which *could* have had value and has none. It is a love of compassion. It is a love of sorrow. It is a love of pathos. It is the same deep sense of compassion and pity we have when we see a scab-ridden derelict lying in the gutter. It is not a love that is incompatible with revulsion, but it is a genuine, well-meant, compassionate, sympathetic love nonetheless.

Frequently the Old Testament prophets describe the tears of God for the lost:

Therefore my heart intones like a harp for Moab, and my inward feelings for Kir-hareseth. So it will come about when Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself upon his high place, and comes to his sanctuary to pray, that he will not prevail. This is the word which the Lord spoke earlier concerning Moab (Isa. 16:11–13).

"And I shall make an end of Moab," declares the Lord, "the one who offers sacrifice on the high place and the one who burns incense to his gods. Therefore My heart wails for Moab like flutes; My heart also wails like flutes for the men of Kir-heres. Therefore they have lost the abundance it produced. For every head is bald and every beard cut short; there are gashes on all the hands and sackcloth on the loins" (Jer. 48:35–37).

Similarly, the New Testament gives us the picture of Christ, weeping over the city of Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children



together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37). Luke 19:41–44 gives an even more detailed picture of Christ’s sorrow over the city:

And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

Those are words of doom, yet they’re spoken in great sorrow. It is genuine sorrow, borne out of the heart of a divine Savior who “wanted to gather [them] together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,” but they were “unwilling.”

Those who deny God’s love for the reprobate usually suggest that what we see here is the human side of Jesus, not His divinity. They say that if this were an expression of sincere desire from an omnipotent God, He would surely intervene in their behalf and save them. Unfulfilled desire such as Jesus expresses here is simply incompatible with a sovereign God, they say.

But consider the problems with that view. Is Christ in His humanity more loving or more compassionate than God? Is tenderness perfected in the humanity of Christ, yet somehow lacking in His deity? When Christ speaks of gathering the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks, is this not deity speaking, rather than humanity? Do not these pronouncements of doom necessarily proceed from His deity as well? And if the words are the words of deity, how can anyone assert that the accompanying sorrow is the product of Christ’s human nature only, and not the divine? Do not our hearts tell us that if God is love—if His tender mercies are over all His works—then what we hear in Jesus’ words must be an echo of the divine?

A Warning & An Open Invitation

October 10th, 2007

(By John MacArthur)

Today we will consider two final ways in which God’s love extends to the whole world. This will conclude our series on the love of God. This series was adapted from John’s book The God Who Loves published by Thomas Nelson.

Admonition

God’s universal love is revealed not only in common grace and His great compassion, but also in His admonition to repent. God is constantly warning the reprobate of their impending fate, and pleading with them to turn away from sin. Nothing demonstrates God’s love more than the various warnings throughout the pages of Scripture, urging sinners to flee from the wrath to come.

Anyone who knows anything about Scripture knows it is filled with warnings about the judgment to come, warnings about hell, and warnings about the severity of divine punishment. If God really did *not* love the reprobate, nothing would compel Him to warn them. He would be perfectly just to punish them for their sin and unbelief with no admonition whatsoever. But He *does* love and He *does* care and He *does* warn.

God evidently loves sinners enough to warn them. Sometimes the warnings of Scripture bear the marks of divine wrath. They sound severe. They reflect God’s hatred of sin. They warn of the irreversible condemnation that will befall sinners. They are unsettling, unpleasant, even terrifying.



But they are admonitions from a loving God who as we have seen weeps over the destruction of the wicked. They are necessary expressions from the heart of a compassionate Creator who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. They are further proof that God is love.

The Gospel Offer

Finally, we see proof that God's love extends to all *in the gospel offer*. We saw earlier that the gospel invitation is an offer of divine mercy. Now consider the unlimited breadth of the offer. No one is excluded from the gospel invitation. Salvation in Christ is freely and indiscriminately offered to all.

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 22:2–14 about a king who was having a marriage celebration for his son. He sent his servants to invite the wedding guests. Scripture says simply, “they were unwilling to come” (v. 3). The king sent his servants again, saying, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast” (v. 4). But even after that second invitation, the invited guests remained unwilling to come. In fact, Scripture says, “They paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them” (vv. 5–6). This was outrageous, inexcusable behavior! And the king judged them severely for it.



Then Scripture says he told his servants, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (v. 9). He opened the invitation to all comers. Jesus closes with this: “Many are called, but few are chosen” (v. 14).

The parable represents God's dealing with the nation of Israel. They were the invited guests. But they rejected the Messiah. They spurned Him and mistreated Him and crucified Him. They wouldn't come—as Jesus said to them:

You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and *you are unwilling to come to Me*, that you may have life. (Jn. 5:39–40)

The gospel invites many to come who are unwilling to come. Many are called who are not chosen. The invitation to come is given indiscriminately to all. Whosoever will may come—the invitation is not issued to the elect alone.

God's love for mankind does not stop with a warning of the judgment to come. It also invites sinners to partake of divine mercy. It offers forgiveness and mercy. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29). And Jesus said, “The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (Jn. 6:37).

It should be evident from these verses that the gospel is a free offer of Christ and His salvation to all who hear. Those who deny the free offer therefore alter the nature of the gospel itself. And those who deny that God's love extends to all humanity obscure some of the most blessed truth in all Scripture about God and His lovingkindness.

God's love extends to the whole world. It covers all humanity. We see it in common grace. We see it in His compassion. We see it in His admonitions to the lost. And we see it in the free offer of the gospel to all.

God *is* love, and His mercy is over all His works.