

## Unconditional Love versus Conditional Love

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Unconditional love does not mean love without limits, structure, discipline or consequences; instead, it is a choice in *perception*—how one chooses to view others and oneself. The ability to love unconditionally is forged in the truth that you are first unconditionally loved by God (Romans 5:8, 9; John 3:16). In His incomprehensible love for us, God has replaced judgment with Jesus—thus, we are freed from the unbearable weight of guilt, fear and shame because Jesus chose to bear the weight of it for us. As one practices the act of unconditional love, he or she is living out the very essence of God’s character in his or her life, choosing to give to others what has first been freely given by God Himself to all who choose to receive it. Pretty cool, right?

**Question:** *How can we define unconditional love?*

To put it simply, unconditional love is *the eternal, objective truth that you are loved because of your inherent value as a human being created in the likeness of God*. Unconditional love has flexibility, transparency, empathy and grace as its fundamental characteristics which serve as the foundation that your relationships are built upon. Unconditional love *chooses to think the best of a person*; and gives him or her *the benefit of the doubt* in problematic situations. Instead of choosing to focus on what a person does or does not do to determine their value, you simply focus on who they are, which includes their whole personhood.

Furthermore, one who loves unconditionally does not see misunderstandings or disagreements as an *attack against their personhood*, nor does it *attack the offender’s personhood*. Instead, it objectively looks at the situation and seeks to bring resolve and healing. It is willing to *look at the world through the eyes of the other person*. An example of the thinking process behind unconditional love toward ones child might be: *“He disobeyed me again. I wonder if I am expressing what I want from him in a way that he can understand.”* This situation is processing and addressing the problem, not the person. Focusing on the problem will help to keep you objective and help to prevent the situation from escalating.

When a parent models unconditional love, he or she is emphatically stating *“I love you for who you are, not because of what you do. My love for you is unwavering because it is based on your inherent value as a person.”* This modeling instills into the child an *unconditional love of self*. The child can say to him or herself *“I can love myself because my value is not based on what I do, but instead, on whom I am. I can differentiate myself from my mistakes—my mistakes do not define me.”*

Conditional love, on the other hand, is based upon ones *temporal, subjective experience*—it is situational and bases the person's value on what he or she does instead of on who he or she is. Conditional love is *critical and rigid*; it applies a black and white standard where love is given and removed based upon *conduct and success*. An example of the thinking process behind conditional love towards ones child might be: *"He never listens to me—what in the world is wrong with him? He must be either deaf or stupid. He loves to push my buttons just like his sister does. I give upon him."* This stands in stark contrast to the flexibility and grace required by the living dynamic of a healthy personal relationship.

What your child internalizes when given unconditional love is an assured core self-belief that he is loved and lovable simply because of *who he is*, even though he makes mistakes. Your child learns to have emotional and cognitive confidence and flexibility; applying grace and forgiveness upon himself to rethink his shortcomings—it's ok to be wrong.

Also, your child is better equipped to love and accept other people for who they are, recognizing we all have equal value, even though we may think and act differently. He or she will have more objectivity when dealing with disagreements because the focus of attention will be on the *problem* at hand, not the flaws in his or her opponent's *character*. First Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT) sum up this point well: *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices when truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."*

Most importantly, as parents, we are like demi-gods to our children. Because their worlds are so limited, what we model as mother and father is almost automatically internalized as truth to their young and formidable minds. What we say and how we say it also has profound significance in how your child will perceive and define himself, the world around him, and how he is supposed to interact within his social environment.

Moreover, parental influence, especially the father, will play a crucial role in how your child perceives and defines God. If, as a father, your relationship with your child is critical and distant emotionally, he or she will transfer those attributes onto the Heavenly Father too. On the other hand, if you are gracious, encouraging and nurturing, he or she will hold a healthier construct of God's character and how to relate to Him.

Beyond this, through our years of clinical practice experience, we have observed another very important difference between those raised under unconditional love as opposed to conditional love. Those who have experienced unconditional love from his or her primary caretakers seem better able to differentiate their *personhood* from their *actions* ("*I failed*" versus "*I am a failure*"). they seem more capable of recognizing that mistakes and successes do not define who they are, but

instead, their actions simply define what they choose to do—ones self-value is a totally separate issue.

Likewise, those raised with conditional love seem more apt to personify their successes and failures as a direct reflection of who they are and what their value is. The person might be more defensive and rigid during disagreements. He or she might also be afraid to be wrong. Being wrong might be perceived as rejection or disapproval because his or her identity is based in behavior. Value is based on external standards, not inherent ones. Thus, an emotional rollercoaster ride where he feels good about himself when he is liked or has succeeded in a recent accomplishment, but badly about himself when he is disapproved of or had a recent failure in his life.

Again, from our experience, it is rarely the parent's intention to make their child feel unloved or loved for the wrong reasons; but depending on the *child's perception* of the interaction, it is still often the case.

As parents, we need to see the conflictual situations from our child's eyes, recognizing that we each have our own perceptions and do what we do based upon our own self-justified rationale. What do you think your child's intentions really are? Did they make a mistake or were their intentions to get you mad? Either way, do not let them "*hook you*" into giving away your authority as the parent—stay the adult!

Remember, children have the ability to pick up on the subtle cues and words from us that will cause them, at least in part, to define themselves in either a positive or negative manner. When they hear negative complaints directed at their personhood, they will be more apt to define themselves in that way. Although subtle, how you choose to respond is monumental when one considers how a person's value is based either upon their ever-changing circumstances in life as opposed to a solid foundation based on love, acceptance, flexibility and grace.