

If you love those who love *you*, what *credit* is that to you? Even sinners love those who love *them*.

The love that our Lord is talking about here is based on getting something for something. It's not love, but a contract. Jesus illustrates this using an example of lending while expecting a return. We should ask, then, what is the motivation behind our love?

Love is something that is often difficult for us to define. Perhaps the reason is that there are different kinds of love. Husbands and wives love each other. They love their children. Siblings love each other. Close friends love each other. We even love those whom we do not know very well or at all. Rushing into a burning building, for example, to save the life of a stranger, is the love of neighbor. These different kinds of love, however, have something in common. In each instance, love *wills* (i.e., chooses), and love *does* the good for another.

If this were not the case, we would say that it is not really love. If I say that I love my wife, but never do a thing for her, that is not love. A young man and a young woman who are infatuated with each other, will often say that they are in love. But unless they have decided to do the good for each other; unless they are committed to this, then, such a relationship, which is based merely on feelings or sexual desire, will not last. We human beings make this mistake quite often, and we end up miserable because of it.

It's not that we can't truly love those who love *us*, but if our love is based on some *return*, like interest on a loan, then, that is something other than love. If we would truly love, then, we must have in us the *will*, the commitment, to do the good for another, and to actually *do* it. The basis of true love is not that someone pleases us, makes feel good, can do something for us, or is useful to us. The basis of true love is a

*commitment* to another person's good, and *acting* on that commitment. Otherwise, such love is of no use to anyone.

The Apostles James says:

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (Jas 2:15–16).

Do we only love those who love *us*? If so, we are not actually willing the good for another person. We are merely seeking to obtain something from them, something for ourselves. In which case, we are using another person merely as a means to getting something that we want. It is not love, then, if it does not *will* and *do* the good for another, that is, for his own sake.

Love, then, has its origin in the mind and the will. Our mind is able to know and understand what is the good we ought to do for another person. And we have a will to choose

what is good, and to do it for another person. Only creatures, like ourselves, that have a mind and a will, are able to love.

We are, in this respect, like the angels. Only spiritual beings have an intellect and will.

But we are not purely spiritual beings like angels.

When we die, we do not become angels in heaven. Our spiritual soul is infleshed. We are not two things – a body here, and soul there, but one composite creature. Our soul, which is spiritual, is not something that is *stuck* in our body, like a shoe in a shoebox. In our culture, however, this is how most people think about themselves. And so, quite often these days, you will find people who separate their identity from their bodies, as if who they are is only in their minds. And there are many others who treat the human body as a mere object of manipulation.

Since we are not pure spirits, both who we are, and our love, is realized in and through our bodies. In the words of Theophane the Recluse (1815-94):

Christianity is spiritual in its higher aspect since grace is of its essence, but it is not invisible. And so, the true Christians are spiritual... but they are not disincarnate..."<sup>1</sup>

Human love, then, is spiritual but also bodily. Thus, husband and wife are united to each other in the love of the marital embrace. Married love is a spiritual-bodily love. And we perform good deeds for one another, not simply in our minds, but in a bodily way. It is not love to say to someone, "keep warm and well fed", but do nothing for them.

Now, since we are fallen creatures, our human nature is wounded, we find it difficult to love. Our mind is darkened and will is weaken. Sometimes we don't understand what is

truly good for another person, and so we do the wrong thing for them. And our passions get in the way. We may see what is the good to do for someone, and even want to do it, but our contrary feelings and emotions overcome us. And we lack the courage to love. If doing the true good for another person is difficult, we may shrink back from it. True love, however, rises above these things, rises above ourselves, to the very heights of heaven.

Think of those holy men and women who serve the sick and destitute, who live among the poorest of the poor. Visiting those who are gravely ill, those who have experienced trauma, or remaining with someone in their final moments of life, can be more than we can bear at times. So, we may pull back from love. We may also pull back from love out of

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Spidlik.

selfishness or an unwillingness to let go of our attachments to pleasure and comfort. The saints manifest love amid great trials and sacrifice. Despite their sufferings, and the natural human tendency to pull back in the face of difficulty, they love, nevertheless.

Here, we begin see that true love exceeds human strength. It is a grace from God because it is only God Himself who truly loves this way. As our Lord says, “You will rightly be called sons of the Most High, since he himself is good to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

Now, a fully human act of love is one in which all of our passions are directed toward love. It is to love not only in spirit and in truth, but with our whole self. It is when our feelings and emotions accompany our love and support it. A fully human act of love means that there is nothing in us that resists our love for others. Love captivates our whole self.

Fully human love captures our whole heart, our feelings and emotions, all of our desires and purifies them. Divine grace, however, raises our human love far above this, to the supernatural, to share in the very love of God Himself. This is the cause of ecstatic joy in the lives of the saints. And this is our destiny in heaven where our love will rise up to the vision of God, and unite us with our brother and sisters without any resistance in our minds and hearts—no darkness in us whatsoever, but total joy and affection for one another. Here, on earth, we are imperfect. Nevertheless, by God’s grace we can ascend to heroic acts of love in this life. And we should constantly beg the Lord to give us this grace as such love is *only* from heaven. St. John Chrysostom says of this love, that

“...nothing earthly engenders it, neither gain, nor kindness, nor nature, nor time, but it descends from heaven”.<sup>2</sup>

If we consider the lives of the saints, we will see in them, a foretaste of the supernatural love that will be fulfilled in us, when we reach our eternal home with all the angels and saints. There, God’s grace will perfect our love both in our body and soul. Our human nature will be perfected and elevated. No longer will we hesitate to love. No longer will our passions war against our will to love. They will come along with us – all of our feelings and emotions will be taken up into true love and goodness. No longer will we love because someone loves *us*, but we will love totally, fully, unconditionally. We will share in His divine life, in the divine

love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will love as God loves us.

But let us not forget that sharing in His divine life and love begins this side of heaven. If we open our hearts to cooperate with His grace, then, He will surely begin to perfect His love in us. This is nothing less than our preparation for eternal life. Let us never grow tired, then, of willing and doing the good for each other, no matter how difficult it may be. Let us, from this day forward, strive to love God and one another with a pure, spiritual love, which is the love of God Himself.

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 3 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 219–220