

The Matter With You, Part 1: No Say in the Matter

Andy Stanley · John 13:34; Philippians 3:4-9; Romans 8:38-39; Luke 2:10

AT A GLANCE

The persistent sense that God's love must be earned is not a private feeling but a structural barrier to following Jesus — because the command to love others as Christ loved us can only flow from a love already received. Until a person settles whether God's love for them is fixed and unconditional, everything else in the Christian life operates on a corrupted foundation.

- God's love for you is not contingent on your performance; you have no say in the matter.
- You cannot give away a grace you have never accepted — judgmentalism is the symptom of an unresolved deficit.
- Faith is not making something true by believing it; it is receiving what is already irreversibly true.

“You overestimate yourself, and you vastly underestimate the love and the grace and the mercy of God.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[John 13:34](#) — “I give you a new command: Love each other. You must love each other just as I loved you.” (ERV)

[Philippians 3:4-9](#) — Even if I am able to trust in myself, still I don't do it. If anyone else thinks they have a reason to trust in themselves, they should know that I have a greater reason for doing so. I was circumcised on the eighth day after my birth. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a true Jew, and so were my parents. The law was very important to me. That is why I became a Pharisee. I was so eager to defend my religion that I persecuted the church. And no one could find fault with the way I obeyed the Law of Moses. At one time all these things were important to me. But because of Christ, I decided that they are worth nothing. Not only these things, but now I think that all things are worth nothing compared with the greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Christ, I lost all these things, and now I know that they are all worthless trash. All I want now is Christ. I want to belong to him. In Christ I am right with God, but my being right does

not come from following the law. It comes from God through faith. God uses my faith in Christ to make me right with him. (ERV)

[Romans 8:38-39](#) — Yes, I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not death, life, angels, or ruling spirits. I am sure that nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing above us or nothing below us—nothing in the whole created world—will ever be able to separate us from the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ERV)

[Luke 2:10](#) — The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid. I have some very good news for you—news that will make everyone happy.” (ERV)

The argument

An Unresolved Question About God's Love Corrupts the Whole Trajectory of Discipleship — You cannot give what you have not received

Andy Stanley opens not with a doctrinal lecture but with pastoral recognition: many people carry a low-grade, ambient sense that God is displeased with them — not traceable to one sin but pervasive enough to color every encounter with faith. His diagnostic move is to show why this is not a private wound but a discipleship crisis. Jesus' one command — 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34) — is structurally dependent on having experienced that love oneself. Stanley names the contradiction plainly: 'You can't give, in this case, what you haven't yet accepted.' The person quick to say 'I'm not perfect' while remaining quick to judge others is not hypocritical by accident; they are operating from a love-deficit. The unresolved question about God's love for them leaves no reservoir to draw from when it is time to extend it.

Insight — Chronic judgmentalism is often not a character flaw but a symptom of grace not yet personally received.

The Feeling That God's Love Is Conditional Is Understandable but Wrong — Its roots are in religious formation and family history, not in the gospel

Andy Stanley meets the resistance before it surfaces: if the thought 'you don't know me' or 'you don't know what I've done' rises in a listener, that thought is not a rebuttal — it is the precise diagnosis. It reveals that the person has, for reasons entirely understandable, come to believe God's acceptance is contingent on something in them. Stanley names the two most common sources: religious environments that trafficked in guilt and shame as the spiritual experience itself, and families where approval was always just out of reach. He is careful not to dismiss these formations — 'if I heard your story, I would go, yeah, no wonder' — but he holds firm that this belief, however it formed, is 'a distortion of what Jesus came to communicate.' The Christmas announcement — 'good news of great joy for all people' (Luke 2:10) — is explicitly universal and explicitly unconditional, two features that make it hard to believe and easy to dismiss.

Insight — The places where you feel most resistant to God's unconditional love are precisely the places that most need it.

Paul's Résumé Is Evidence That Performance Neither Earns Nor Forfeits God's Love — The best rulekeeper and the worst persecutor was loved the same

Andy Stanley calls Paul as the ideal witness because Paul holds both extremes simultaneously. Before meeting Jesus, Paul was a Pharisee who could claim perfect pedigree and faultless law-keeping — 'as for righteousness based on the law, faultless,' in Paul's own words (Philippians 3:6). After meeting Jesus, he called himself the chief of sinners, having arrested, tortured, and overseen the execution of Christians. Stanley's point is that these two realities cancel each other's claim on God's love: 'His flawless rulekeeping didn't earn God's love, and his merciless persecution and execution of Christians didn't erase God's love.' Paul's conclusion — that his entire résumé of religious achievement he now considers 'garbage' — is not false modesty but the logical consequence of discovering that love was never the prize of performance to begin with.

Insight — If neither the best religious achievement nor the worst moral failure can move the needle on God's love, the needle was never yours to move.

Faith Is Not Manufacturing a Reality — It Is Receiving One Already Given — The distinction between believing something into existence and receiving what is already true

Andy Stanley draws a sharp line between faith as magic and faith as reception. Some religious environments, he notes, operate as though belief creates reality — 'if you believe it, it'll become true.' He calls this 'some distortion of Christianity.' The actual logic runs the opposite direction: 'The reason we are called to believe is because it's already true. It's already happened. You aren't making something happen.' Right standing with God, in Paul's framing from Philippians 3, comes not from a righteousness of one's own that comes from lawkeeping but from God, on the basis of faith — a gift 'that has already been given.' The life application is then stark: 'It is a gift that isn't experienced until it's recognized and received.' Nothing in the receiver changes the gift; the only variable is whether the gift is opened.

Insight — Faith does not produce God's love; it is the posture by which a love already given becomes a love actually experienced.

It Is God's Unconditional Love, Not His Demands, That Bends the Will — Romans 8 as the ground of transformation, not moralism

Andy Stanley closes his argument with the passage from Romans 8:38-39, noting pointedly that Paul wrote it to strangers in Rome — people he had never met — which means the declaration is conditioned on nothing they had done. Neither death nor life, neither present nor future,

neither height nor depth, 'nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.' Stanley then delivers what he calls the most important claim of the message: 'It is his immutable, unchangeable love for you, not his demands, that melts our resistance and bends our wills to his.' If demands alone could change a life, he argues, anyone raised in church would already be transformed. The engine of formation is not obligation but reception — saying yes, finally, to a love that has been fixed in place the entire time.

Insight — Moral demands can constrain behavior from the outside; only received love transforms it from the inside.

Cross-references

- [John 13:34](#) — The hinge command — love one another as Christ loved you — which Andy Stanley uses to show that receiving God's love is a discipleship prerequisite, not merely a comfort.
- [Philippians 3:4-9](#) — Paul's self-described résumé of perfect religious performance, which he calls garbage after meeting Jesus, used to show that neither achievement nor failure determines God's love.
- [Romans 8:38-39](#) — Quoted in full as Paul's settled conviction — written to strangers, conditioned on nothing — that nothing in creation can separate us from God's love.
- [Luke 2:10](#) — The angel's Christmas announcement of good news for all people, invoked to show that the unconditional scope of God's love was declared at the very advent of Jesus.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a question most of us carry so quietly we have stopped noticing it: where do I actually stand with God? It surfaces on Sundays, in the brief stillness before sleep, in the moment a sermon presses close. We answer it instinctively, almost automatically, by reaching for our record — what we have done, what we have left undone, whether the ledger is favorable today. That reflex is so deeply trained it feels like common sense. It feels like honesty. But Andy Stanley's word this morning names that reflex for what it is: a category error. We have been applying the logic of earning to a love that was never in the earning category. Paul, who had the best religious résumé imaginable and who also had blood on his hands, discovered that neither credential moved the needle on God's love — because the needle was never his to move. The love was fixed. The gift was given. The only question was whether he would receive it. John Mark McMillan wrote it after grief cracked him open: God loves like a hurricane, and we are simply the tree. The hurricane does not ask the tree's permission. It does not wait for the tree to become worthy of bending. It simply arrives, and everything yields. You are not a factor in determining the love of God. This is not a comfortable thought — it is a demolishing one. It demolishes the quiet pride that says your obedience earns favor, and it demolishes the quieter

despair that says your failure forfeits it. Both are the same error: both assume you hold the variable. What changes when this moves from the head to the heart is not that you try harder. It is that you stop negotiating. You yield. And in yielding, you find — perhaps for the first time — a love large enough to pass on.

Reflection

- When you think about God knowing you specifically — your history, your habits, your private failures — what do you imagine he feels toward you, and where did that image come from?
- Where in your relationships do you find it hardest to extend grace without keeping score, and what might that reveal about how fully you have received grace yourself?
- What would need to change in the way you live — concretely, practically — if you genuinely believed that nothing you do this week could diminish God's love for you?

Closing prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for this. Thank you for a love that does not wait for us to earn it, that was not diminished by the worst we have done and was not increased by the best. Most of us would say we believe this. What we are less sure of is whether we have received it — whether we have let it travel from the mind to the place where it changes us. Give us the courage to stop negotiating and simply receive. For the one carrying guilt with no name, let it be eclipsed today. For the one who has walked away, let this be an open door. Thank you for sending Jesus not only to preach this love but to demonstrate it — at a well, in a crowd ready to throw stones, at a table with a tax collector, and from a cross. Draw us to yourself by the grace in your eyes. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

God's love for you is not contingent on your performance — you have no say in the matter, and that is the best news there is.

This week

This week, sit with Romans 8:38-39 for five minutes on two separate days — not to study it but to receive it. Read it slowly, then in prayer name one specific thing you have used as evidence that God is displeased with you, and hold it against Paul's words: 'nor anything else in all creation.' Let the text answer the accusation.

Return to [Romans 8:38-39](#)