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LOVE UNCONDITIONAL OR
LOVE UNFEIGN ED: JUSTICE AND
MERCY IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Trevor R. McKee, Ph.D.

When I want to know how to be a good father, I go to church, consult the scriptures, and listen to the authorities. (Boyd K. Packer, 1985)

One morning last spring I began leading a discussion in our high priest's group by asking questions based on a popular concept. My questions were, simply, "When we hear someone encourage us to love our children unconditionally, what does unconditionally mean to you? How would you express love unconditionally to your children?"

As I wrote on the chalkboard the responses I heard, various shades of meaning began to emerge. I was not surprised to see a familiar perception of love being discussed. But what this group of high priests described as unconditional love clearly did not carry the same meaning the people who coined the term unconditional love had in mind.

What was it, then, the high priests in this group were describing? Or perhaps more appropriately, what parental behavior is it the humanists are calling for with the terminology of this concept?

The purpose of this exposition is to show that the love many are calling "unconditional" (for example, those who are coming from a gospel perspective) is, upon reflection, radically different from the contemporary (humanist) psychological notion of unconditional love. It is, therefore, much more than just a matter of semantics.

One outcome of this paper should be to help us see why thoughtful parents anguish in confusion when they hear from so many quarters that they are to "love their children unconditionally"; to "love their children no matter what those children do." I hope in this paper to offer some relief to those who want to understand the relationship between misbehavior and the love the children may or may not receive from their parents. Sometimes it is necessary to chastise or reprimand children—something which is far from conditional love.
How did this problem get started? A review of two popular perspectives on child-rearing strategies will show how the clash emerged. This may help us understand why there is so much confusion that still lingers over when we should or should not give love to children. The first perspective we will review is high powered in its orientation; the second is permissive.

High-Powered Parenting

The advice we get on parenting, based on empirical studies, strongly suggests that high social and academic achievement in children is associated with parents who are powerful, whose control attempts are inductive, and who are characterized by the child as supportive (Rollins, 1979). Consider one way that a parent fitting this typology might handle a common discipline problem.

In the Jackson home, the job of keeping the garage clean falls to the oldest son. Recently, the garage got so dirty that it was hard for anyone to find his or her way around. Dad Jackson wrote his son a note. It merely said: "Tim, please clean the garage, soon!" That evening at the table Dad got an empathetic reply: "I know it is really bad. I'll get to it this weekend." But when Saturday rolled around, Tim and his friends found the day was too nice to pass up, so they went sailing. During the next week no attempts were made to make up for Saturday. For three weeks Dad patiently listened to Tim's logical excuses and his renewed resolves to get right at the job: but that was all they were. The garage was still dirty, and Dad felt it was due time for him to intervene.

What should Mr. Jackson do? Or perhaps more appropriate questions that Jackson may have contemplated are, "What do I want to accomplish?" Or, "What do I want my child to experience?" At the task or behavioral level it is obvious that the garage needs to be cleaned. If Jackson approaches it on the basis of getting the job done (a behavioral objective), he probably takes the position that "if I want it done, then it is up to me to set something up." If it doesn't get done, then we have an example of a weak parent. If it does get done, then we see an example of a strong, effective parent, typical of the prototype described. This mentality suggests that what the parent does to move the child will make all the difference. It is up to the parents to find appropriate incentives and motivate their children, to help them internalize the rules through good habits and many successes.

Jackson's attempt to control by inducing Tim with good reasoning might sound like this: (Warmly) "Son, I've asked you several times
to clean the garage, but you keep procrastinating. What do you think I ought to do? It’s not like you to ignore me. It seems that cleaning the garage is on the bottom of your list of priorities. It seems like anything that comes along ... I know you said again you would get to it this Saturday, but I’m not sure you will. I think maybe we had better go over the consequences that we all agreed to when we made the assignments in the family. I think it just isn’t fair to the rest of us if one person keeps getting out of doing his job. Let me remind you of our agreement. You earn your allowance and the use of the car, which I think you feel is fair, by keeping the garage clean; in the winter you shovel the snow; in the summer you cut the lawn. Is that right? Do you still think that is fair? Now the garage has got to be cleaned before this Sunday. I guess you can do it, or I can hire our neighbor Steve to do it and pay him with your allowance. I’m not going to hassle you over this. You know that. If it isn’t done by Saturday at noon, I’ll simply get someone else to do it.”

With a reminder of those consequences Tim makes sure the garage is cleaned, one way or another, since the use of the car and the allowance are very important to him, and since he does not want to let his dad down.

What did this inductive parenting style take as an objective? That is, what did Jackson as a parent want to accomplish? He wanted to control behavior, to get the task done, to get compliance. Getting compliance, and having a child feel good about it, is always the objective of parents who see motivation as their job. The basic assumption of this model is that some force external to the child pushes or pulls a response. That external force is always the antecedent to a child’s behavior. The perspective of parents’ persuading in this manner is that because of their technique the behavior changes. The child yields to the parents’ superior power, forceful reason, or undeniable control of the resources. He does yield and he does conform. And the child may even grant or legitimize the parents’ right to exercise persuasive control.

What makes this process work? It works, according to this empirically supported perspective, because early in infancy the dynamics were already being shaped into the child’s mode of interaction with his or her caregivers. It starts when the infant begins to develop a bond of attachment to the principal caregivers. Here is what happens:

From the first day of life instrumental needs are met by principal caregivers. The infant comes to anticipate that those needs will be met by specific persons. As the needs are met, bonds of attachment are developed between the caregivers and the infant. The infant develops a dependency on the caregivers to meet those needs. Parents who are
warm and loving and who respond promptly and appropriately to their infant’s cries develop a secure attachment between themselves and their infant. A securely attached infant develops a sense of trust that needs will be met by loving caregivers.

In an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, love, acceptance, and approval (or support) over time, the infant feels free to explore and experience the environment. However, not everything the infant does may be acceptable. The infant may discover the mother’s negative responses for the first time when he or she bites the nipple. The mother scowls, says something harsh, stops the feeding, and leaves the baby alone for a minute. The baby cries. This is repeated a second and a third time when the infant tries the same trick. About the fourth time, the infant hesitates and resists. This change of intent suggests the emergence of a developing conscience. Momentarily the infant remembers what happens after he or she bites. The memory of that experience produces within the baby what is called a fear of nurturance withdrawal. The negative state or fear of nurturance withdrawal that the infant experiences teaches the baby that not biting (complying with mother’s wishes) removes the fear or negative state, and the infant returns to equilibrium.

Through the toddler months and into early childhood, the child learns which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. The child learns to anticipate what behaviors are likely to bring on some form of nurturance withdrawal on the part of the adult world. Children who learn how to avoid nurturance withdrawal before it happens are those who have learned to live within the constraints of the social norm. They learn that by compliance they can eliminate any fear of nurturance withdrawal that might be associated with an anticipated behavior. This process is called anticipatory socialization and is a skill children learn early and exhibit throughout life. It is through this process that society is capable of controlling its members and preserving the social order.

The Humanistic Challenge: Permissive Parenting

After World War II, a reaction to this concept became the target among certain psychologists and therapists as a form of resistance or as an alternative to the technological advances in behavior modification. These proponents were the humanists. They got inspiration in large part from the writings of the existential philosophies coming from Europe (Crain, 1985, pp. 261–62).

The notion of unconditional love emerged and rolled across not only this country but the world as a humanistic reaction to the mechanistic
practice of socializing children through a growing technology of nurturance withdrawal paradigms (Rogers, 1958, pp. 15-16). It appeared to offer a fresh and appealing alternative to socializing children.

The bandwagon response unconditional love received has even found its way to the pulpit and Sunday School classes. This acceptance has added to its popular appeal a kind of religious zeal and consequently an informal theological sanction.

How shall we take the admonition that children are entitled to unconditional love from their parents? On the surface, one way to take this advice might be, "No matter what you do I'll still love you." And another might be, "We should never say to a child, if you act like that I won't love you." These are fairly accurate adages, but the concept goes deeper than them.

The unconditional love perspective holds that the reasons youngsters have problems in behavior and adjustment stem from hang-ups they acquire because of the way conditions are placed on the love they get. If it weren't for the acceptance/rejection threat bound up in the expectations parents make on behavior as a precondition for certain expressions of acceptance and love, children wouldn't turn out the way they do.

So, for the humanists, the claim is that compliance is just what they do not want from their children. Well then, what kind of child behavior is it that the humanists value, and how do they propose we should go about getting it? What we want, the humanists reason, is for our children to be self-fulfilling, congruent, responsive, aware of their feelings and the feelings of others, and to behave appropriately where "appropriate" means that behavior is determined by one's feelings of the moment plus the contexts, not by some rules imposed by external forces (Coombs, 1962). All these are humanistic values. And the way you get this to happen is to let children know that no matter what they do you will still love them. That is, the humanists want parents to shift to the other end of the continuum, away from using conditional love as a contingency for manipulating behavior.

A. S. Neill (1960) developed Summerhill, a private school in England, around this notion. The atmosphere in the school seemed to offer a fresh new approach to child education. In his chapter on love and approval, Neill criticizes religious education and condemns the imposition of moral values on children. He believes "parents are spoiling their children's lives by forcing on them outdated beliefs, outdated manners, outdated morals. They are sacrificing the child to the past. This is particularly true of those parents who impose authoritative religion on their children just as it was once imposed on them"
(1960, p. 118). As a reaction to giving moral instruction he declares with strong conviction that "the boy is never in the wrong" (1960, p. 298). He thinks that in the case of children it is psychologically wrong to give moral instruction.

The adults cling to old values—old emotional values. There is no logical basis for a father's prohibiting his twenty-year-old daughter from smoking. The prohibition springs from emotional sources, from conservative sources. At the back of prohibition is the fear, What may she do next? The crowd is the guardian of morality. The adult fears to give freedom to the young because he fears that the young may do indeed all the things that he, the adult, has wanted to do. The eternal imposition on children of adult conceptions and values is a great sin against childhood. (1960, pp. 112-13)

Instead he holds that "children do not need teaching as much as they need love and understanding. They need approval and freedom to be naturally good" (1960, p. 118). The way parents can produce children whose lives are characterized by humanistic values is to "be on the side of their children, demanding nothing in return, and therefore getting a lot" (1960, p. 117). He wants a home and a school system in which "the children and the adults have equal rights" (1960, p. 107). If children are given love and approval, if they are trusted and understood, if they are not forced to obey rules imposed by adults, and if parents will not disapprove of their children's misbehavior, because to children "disapproval means hate," they will become self-regulated and on their own come to protect the rights of others, "soon accept[ing] social laws" (1960, p. 120).

**Challenging the Humanists**

If this is a fair representation of the tone of the humanistic reaction to childrearing, then there appears to be at least three fundamental flaws in humanist thinking.

First, humanists have made a serious conceptual error by not keeping parental love or nurturance conceptually separate from child behavior. What they created instead was a false dichotomy between conditional love and unconditional love, presenting both as functions of children's behavior. It would appear, on the surface, that in telling caregivers that children are entitled to parental love no matter what the children do, they have separated love and behavior. But this is an illusion, as we shall see.

Remember, the idea of unconditional love became popular in the U.S. mostly through the writings and lectures of the father of
client-centered humanistic therapy, Carl Rogers. In his writings as far back as the 1950s he admonishes all who are in a caring relationship to treat children with “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1959). (The cumbersome term positive regard was eventually replaced and popularized with the more simple and commonly understood term love. The meanings of unconditional love and unconditioned positive regard are essentially the same.) He taught that parents who “prize” their children treat them with unconditional positive regard (1959, p. 208). This term became the reactionary apothegm against the practice of parental control attempts in general and the notions of nurturance withdrawal in particular for getting compliance from children. But as often is the case when an idea pops up as a reaction, it usually remains tied to the theoretical or psychological traditions from which it stems.

Both Rogers and Neill felt caught and stifled by the demands of their religious traditions. In fact, it was from the outset a reaction to their religious traditions that led them to look for a different set of values and a different methodology and to fight against any parenting procedure that imposed moral standards upon developing children (Neill, 1960, p. 242; Rogers, 1961, p. 5). But their look was more of a glance at some appealing existential ideas than a careful reading of the philosophical underpinnings that sprouted those ideas. When they borrowed some existential concepts they failed to bring with those concepts the underlying theoretical or philosophical principles which are the roots from which existential thinking grew. As a consequence of this serious blunder, their perception of human behavior remains essentially the same as the behaviorists—causal and mechanistic. Consequently, any talk about freedom of the “self” (which concept the humanist threw in as a thought on what caregivers should do to keep the self independent from interference) is quite hollow. But in insisting on the notion of a self they become indefensible to the behaviorists. For the behaviorists, self is a vague term and therefore meaningless and inoperable. Only observable behavior can be controlled by manipulations from the environment. Such conceptual inconsistencies make it difficult for rational people to embrace humanism.

What was it Neill said? It really is quite behavioristic. The difference is not in method but in what variables are being manipulated. “I believe that it is moral instruction that makes the child bad. I find that when I smash the moral instruction a bad boy has received, he becomes a good boy” (Neill, 1960, p. 250). So children are taken to be passive to the socialization attempts of the caregivers. If it weren’t for what caregivers were doing, children wouldn’t be like they are.
Hence children are victimized by the methods of their caregivers. This voice of accusation blames conditional love as the cause of misbehavior. Children's reactions in the form of rebellion and misbehavior are brought on and explained by restrictive parenting. So supportive data pile up as every bad kid is observed through this psychologistic, i.e., causal, perspective.

So what is the humanist solution? To give love unconditionally. True, the idea of unconditional love calls for a rethinking of what we are doing with love. But love expressed even unconditionally is actually conceived as an antecedent to the kind of behavior that the humanists are calling for. It is not a fresh approach at all, but only a modification of the same old causal theme. Instead of reinforcing the compliance to the traditional moral or ethical values, the humanists only reinforce a different set of values with a different set of contingencies. They want children to comply to such behaviors as being independent, creative, freed from a nagging conscience, open to and having a sense of awareness of their own feelings, independent from institutions, free from binding rules and preconditions that stifle growth, etc. So if both conditional and unconditional love are only extremes on how we manipulate the environment, then perhaps this dichotomization of love will turn out to be no love at all. Perhaps to take children's behavior to be the result of either extreme of the dichotomy is only a variation of feigned love.

But this is not all; and this is the second problem. Think about applying the logic of unconditional love to the other end of the continuum: unconditional punishment, unconditional rejection, or unconditional hatred. The notion of 'whatever you do I will love you' is really quite problematic. Consider for a moment, by way of some sinister hyperbole, what the outcome might be if I were to proceed with my child on the basis of unconditional rejection. No matter what he does I will reject him. If my child comes home with bad grades, I reject him; if he comes home with good grades, I reject him. But, in the unconditional love causal model, if he comes home with good grades, I love him; if he comes home with bad grades, I love him equally.

There is a problem of children's knowing what is punishment and what is reward. To some children some things are rewarding, but to others different things are rewards. The same with punishment. Similarly, how do you operationalize love? How does the child know when he is loved? If the child thinks he is loved when you ignore bad grades or when you give him what he wants, then what he does may not be what you expected. If our reason tells us that unconditional rejection is clearly wrong as a strategy for childrearing, why should we,
at the other end of the same continuum, think that unconditional love is right? If in a causal model a child is rewarded for wrong and right behaviors, how will the child ever know which behavior is appropriate? So the best things we can say are that unconditional love is selective and that humanists are using it to increase the likelihood the child will perform the behaviors valued by the humanists. If it is selective, it may not be unconditional at all. It is quite likely the child will read in your indifference to the child’s behavior that you don’t love him or her at all; you want only to posture yourself as a kind parent.

It appears that this whole conceptualization of love and behavior is misguided, and we are being led astray. It certainly is confusing. Clearly the relationship between behavior and love needs some more work in conceptualization. I shall return to this when I discuss justice and mercy.

Finally, while there has been a widespread popular appeal to the notion of unconditional love in our preaching, there nonetheless can be found no scriptural support for the concept or language whatsoever. While there are references and parables and stories of unfeigned love, there is not one single mention of the word or idea of unconditional love in holy writ. Nonetheless, many are citing (misrepresenting) the scriptural stories as evidence which they offer as a demonstration of the notion of unconditional love (for example, the Prodigal Son).

And how would those advocating unconditional love handle the scripture D&C 95:12? Would they take Christ’s language to be conditional or unconditional love when he chastised the Saints at Kirtland for failing to build the House of the Lord? “If you keep not my commandments, the love of the Father shall not continue with you, therefore you shall walk in darkness.” Does this mean that if we don’t keep the commandments he won’t love us? Or does it mean something else?

Some might argue that conditions are placed on his love when he says that those who don’t keep the commandments will not have his love, and thereby justify the use of conditional love. It seems to me, however, that to take this perspective is to see a God who is manipulative. It is to embrace a God who we believe can get us to be obedient by making what he can give to us conditional upon keeping his commandments. Such a belief of God does not reconcile with a concept of agency, but rather with one of causality. How could someone be deprived of God’s love and not take God to be making that love conditional upon keeping the commandments? Perhaps we get into trouble when we see love as being on and off, as either conditional or unconditional. Perhaps that is how some may use it, but maybe that isn’t the way unfeigned love is expressed at all.
Perhaps the reason this happens is that behavior and love have been fused together conceptually by both the behaviorists and the humanists. And they are kept together because both behaviorists and humanists see a causal relationship between love and behavior. "Make love (the reinforcer) a condition of behavior (child compliance)" vs. "Give love unconditionally, for then the child will behave appropriately and congruently." Both perceptions see a causal, psychologistic relationship between what the parent does and how the child behaves. "What I do affects how my child will behave." Or accusingly by both perspectives, "If it weren’t for what you are doing, Mom, your kid wouldn’t be acting that way." It is only when we separate the causal relationship between love and behavior through the perception of the concepts of justice and mercy that this dilemma ceases to be a dilemma at all. How justice and mercy become critical parenting behaviors is the topic of the next section of this paper.

But let’s look at love from a nonpsychologistic perspective. Perhaps feeling the pure love of the Father is an act of ours. Perhaps receiving the love of the Father comes not, as some may believe, from the fact that he is either always watching and will accept us if we do good and will reject us if we do evil, or, in the conceptualization of the humanists, he is eternally reaching out to bless our lives with pure love by giving us his divine goodness and light no matter what our behavior. Where and how accessible his love is, perhaps, is a function of our heart.

I take it that the Father’s love is never feigned but is the same as the pure love of Christ. It always exists. It does not shift about in order to achieve compliance to his commandments by his children. It is neither conditional nor unconditional. It just is. It has no ulterior purpose: "charity seeketh not her own."

If this is so, then how must we see the relationships between love and behavior? Before we talk about justice and mercy, we must take a close look at what feigned and unfeigned love are and how they are expressed and felt. Then we will be able to see where behavior fits in.

*Unfeigned love* has been referred to as the pure love of Christ, as charity.

And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

(Moro. 7:45)
Those possessed of unfeigned love look for and find the needs of others and use their resources to bless them. When they see the life of someone they love being blessed, they rejoice as if it were their own life being blessed. Remember what the Savior's response was to the righteous who did not recognize that they had clothed him or come unto him or fed him or given him drink? "In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

So, following that model, when we see someone get something that we would want for ourselves (a gift, a trip, a blessing) and do not covet it but truly feel that person's joy as if it were our own, the same as if we had actually received the gift, then we can count that person as one for whom we have unfeigned love. I recommend that we try that as a criterion to measure our performance towards others on the scale of love. This feeling permeates families possessed of unfeigned love.

If I feel a desire, for example, to prepare breakfast for my daughter who is hurrying to get to school earlier than usual, and respond to those feelings solely to be true to the inclinations of my heart, I express charity and unfeigned love to her. If, on the other hand, before preparing her breakfast (or during preparation, or even after she has eaten and left, it doesn't matter) I begin to get motivated because of some consequence that this opportunity might have for me, I don't express unfeigned love. I may be thinking only, "Hey, cooking her breakfast (something I seldom do) will surprise her and can't help but make points for me in her mind. She's bound to think I'm a great dad. The way things have been going lately between us, I could use some strokes like that." Then, in thinking this, fixing breakfast ceases to be an act of pure love, an act of charity. It becomes, to the contrary, an act of feigned love. I am posturing. At best, cooking breakfast becomes an investment in self-love. My payoff is to make myself a great dad, in her mind.

Parents who express unfeigned love both show and feel love all the time. There are no antecedents to their giving it. There are no ulterior purposes in expressing it. Their love is charity. Their love is not an investment for self-love. It is available and ready to all who can see it and receive it. And that leads us to the perceptual difference, to a real alternative in expressing love in a family relationship. It is the child who must act on the unfeigned expressions of love to understand, recognize, and transform them from the parent into his or her heart and mind. If a child can't see the love, isn't near it, or doesn't look for it (accessibility) even though walking with it or doesn't recognize it, then the child won't experience it.
How could children not see it? When children rebel and cut themselves off emotionally or physically, they lose accessibility to that love. They look at their parents and see them as rigid, mean, and unsympathetic to their wants. Seeing the parents that way, they block availability to the parents' love. Some children move out. Others just stay home and raise hell while they are there, criticizing, complaining, and blaming the parents for not meeting demands.

But when and if those children come to see that their behavior is a sham and repent so that it brings a complete change of heart and a transformation of thought and action, all of a sudden they see things as they really are: that their parents are filled with unfeigned love, that it is free and available for the children to feel and act on. (Of course, if the parents are feigning their love, then all that is going on is a power struggle, getting one's way being dependent on who has control of the resources. But this paper is for loving parents; powerful vs. inept parenting is the topic of another paper.) Children will then come back to the parents, standing on holy ground in their presence and filled with compassion and mercy.

But this feeling can come about only through a godly repentance. There is no vision of pure love without godly repentance and a desire to live righteously on the part of the receiver. So there it is: Sin and disobedience on the part of children move them away from love, while the honest parents remain unchanged in their expression. The parents may have never manipulated their children. They may have never set any preconditions for getting the love. They probably taught that children who act in such a way lose it all due solely to such behavior.

Let's take a closer look at what leads to an absence of love between members in a family. There are at least two ways of conceptualizing the absence of pure love in a relationship. One is that the giver will not or does not give it. The other is that the receiver cannot or will not feel it. The giver holds back for at least two reasons: either what he or she is doing is not love at all but a feigned expression of it, or the giver outrightly withholds it. When love is not felt because of the behavior of the receiver, then at least two explanations stand out: first, propinquity or accessibility, and second, perception or recognition.

No love given

First, absence of love due to the giver's feigned expressions seems to be one of the most common culprits. If you wanted to feign your love, what would you have to do? Obviously you would take out the charity but try to make it appear present. When a father wants respect from his daughter and feels that if he denies her the use of the car
until she gets her grades up (something they had agreed upon as a consequence of low grades), she may accuse her father of being unfair, mean, and not as reasonable as other dads. In this case, he may let his daughter have the car anyway. "After all," he reasons (but confusedly), justifying his actions, "I can show her I love her." But from that point forward, everything the dad says will be an attempt to fix in his daughter's mind that he is a fair dad, worthy of her respect. But the truth is that he hasn't expressed love at all. The best we can say of this parental behavior is that it was an investment. It was made in order to get something in return, for which he was willing to pay the cost. This is feigned love because it is given to get compliance.

These exchanges take place everywhere under the guise of love. But when the mask is removed we see only a naked sham—a person trying to get gain, even though willing to give his "client" a little something in return. A young dating girl who wants the status of being seen with a first stringer on the ball team often enters into an arrangement in which she allows the young man to treat her as he wants, if she can be his steady girl. The cover-up of this sham is calling it love. It is not. It is just another exchange, an investment made using the barter system.

Whether the investment is big or little, it is still an investment and not love. Certainly there is nothing wrong in making an exchange with someone: "I'll cook the dinner, keep the house, and tend the kids if you will earn the money." "I'll give you kisses, Daddy, if you will give me a piece of your gum." These exchanges, while they may be lovely, are not love. Love is holy; it is charity, consecrated and given for someone's benefit without consideration of renumeration or paybacks. It is possible that the willingness to enter into an exchange relationship with someone could be an act of unfeigned love. But the exchange that follows needs to be seen as it is, namely an exchange. And love given with any strings attached is not love at all but an investment with an expected payoff.

So what did we do? Did we come full circle to Roger's theory? Wouldn't he contend, "That's what I said. Love must be unconditional"? Not exactly, for conceptually he misses the point; when one loves, when one cares deeply about someone, that love flows into another. So Rogerian, humanistic love at best is evidence of posturing as being kind. It is really a refusal to love.

Second, withholding love deliberately may be due to insensitivity or selfishness. It may be due to inability also. Sometimes we run out of time and resources to bless everyone's lives. But that is a different issue. People who deny love because of neglect or not caring, or
because they are too caught up in their own world of work or play, are frequently too hurried to give love to others unless the two courses happen to meet. This kind of a problem is easier to overcome. They must learn to make time for those over whom they have stewardship.

No Love Received

First, one way to miss out on love that is being given is to not be around where it is given. This is the issue of propinquity. One cannot be loved by a friend one has never met. Or if a child chooses to run away from home, he or she cannot participate in the daily expressions of love that flow in the home.

A second way to miss out on the love of others is to be blind to it, even if the receiver is in the presence of and interacting with the giver. If the way a child is seeing things is such that the child's perceptions are incongruent with those of the giver, then the love expressed will bounce off and never be felt.

I would like to examine these last two conditions of no love received from the framework of the scriptures, because I think that in taking a look at love from the perspective of the receiver and the ability to perceive it, we will be able to see the real relationship between behavior and love, putting to rest the controversy between conditional and unconditional love. That is, if we can see that there is a relationship between love and behavior and if we can come to know just what the true relationship between them ought to be, then I think we will see that the controversy between conditional and unconditional love is a pseudo-issue.

Justice and Mercy

Now we are ready to talk about justice and mercy in parenting. But let's resist thinking of the demands of justice as some kind of prior condition or antecedent which the parent sets up that must be satisfied before the parent can give love or mercy to a wayward child. That is, we will not take love and mercy to be something that the parent withholds until the child complies to the rules and justice is obtained. Nor will we think of it as something to inflict punishment so as to create the illusion of a choice either to repent or face this awful punishment. Nor will we think of justice and mercy as old hat with rules that are relative.

But I will nevertheless hold tenaciously that what children do (their behavior) is going to make all the difference in the world as to whether they feel the love of their parents. The reception of unfeigned love can be and is what they obtain only after acting and expressing the intentions of their hearts. And let's not think of children who are
motivated to act with the expectation of love as an antecedent controlling their desire to behave in a certain way to get love.

In a system to which we attribute the characteristics of intentionality, that is, the law of action (as opposed to inanimate systems—those that are acted upon by the laws of motion), the consequence of an action can never be the antecedent (Taylor, 1964, p. 16). The intention is always first. It is the action itself that gives evidence of intentions, not the other way around. Actions give evidence of intentions, and what is obtained as a consequence of actions is the result of first the intention and then the action which produced the desired outcome.

Let's look at human behavior in the light of Alma's teachings. While Alma talks about these principles on a grand scale, encompassing all of humanity, the principle does not change one whit when applied to individual family relationships.

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.

Now, repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, affixed opposite to the plan of happiness, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul.

Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?

Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man.

Now, if there was no law given—if a man murdered he should die—would he be afraid he would die if he should murder?

And also, if there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin.

And if there was no law given, if men sinned what could justice do, or mercy either, for they would have no claim upon the creature?

But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law infliceth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.
But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice.

For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved.

What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God.

(Alma 42:14–25)

What is the real parenting problem of our time? From my perspective, the problem is that with the popularization of the concept of unconditional love, people have become confused. Love and behavior have been fused together. Alma helps us see clearly why the two, because of the child’s disobedience, are separable and have to be treated independently. Clearly the demands of justice cannot be ignored. But that does not mean that the parents who require justice love their child any less. To the contrary, requiring obedience is a godly expression of love (D&C 95:1–2; Lewis, 1960, p. 154). But, as discussed earlier, a child’s rebellion keeps the child from receiving that love.

Parents today are confused as to whether they should teach obedience and require justice on the one hand or merely give love, ignoring the problem or behavior, on the other. But it is not an either/or condition. If God the Father ceased to require justice, he would cease to be God. So it is in parenting; those who cease to require justice will cease to have “dominion” (influence) as parents. We cannot offer up love at the expense of justice in our homes. That is indulgence. Well then, how do we make justice and love compatible? Obviously, the scriptures teach us it is through repentance and mercy. Let’s see how it works in the home.

First, we see in the light of Alma’s teachings that feeling parental love is a result obtained by the child’s act of softening his or her heart through real repentance. That is to say, feeling the parent’s unfeigned love gives evidence of a child’s softened heart. So there it is! The most fruitful business of working with disobedient children is to help them soften their hearts. And then we have a bridge between obedience and justice on the one side and unfeigned love and mercy on the other.

Unless they live a certain kind of life, unless the children’s hearts are right, they won’t have access to that love that is most important.
They may "find life" in misbehavior, toys, and playthings, or in acquiescence and conformity, but in actuality they will "lose it."

Second, parents need to focus their attempts to persuade not on behaviors but on children's perceptions. Parents need to be strong, loving, powerful people who know the law, teach good rules, and understand the concepts of justice, repentance, and mercy as taught by Alma.

This means that the parents see children not as something that is molded by their hands like a piece of potter's clay, but as something that is unfolding based on light and life that came in the very creation of life. This is a child who acts willingly on the correct teachings of parents. A parent who has this vision believes it is the child who must, if you will, "act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence . . . here is the agency of man . . ." (D&C 93:31). (And to not do it, we are told, is condemnation.)

The purpose of reaching out and of the desire to communicate is to touch a heart. The outcome centers on helping children see what happens when their actions, and their actions alone, bring about a softening of the heart, an abandonment of stiff-necked, rigid (or even mellow and passive) resistance to righteousness and an insistence on accomplishing impure intent or practice. (See 1 Ne. 2:16, in which Nephi desires to see and the Lord softens and purifies his heart.) The outcome centers on helping children see the light and a vision of truth. Then when their hearts are soft, truth is seen and repentance brings them unto the arms of the caregiver, seeking forgiveness, "submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit in all things." To some this may sound like hard-core manipulation. Seeing such behavior psychologically is a problem of perception. It always is. Righteous parents are not "making" their children behave in a particular way. There are no antecedent consequences to repentance and soft hearts. If there were, the behavior could never be repentance or softening of the heart (Nibley, 1985, p. 26). The children, at some point, choose to yield to their softening hearts, recognizing their wrongdoing and desiring to repent and make amends. Once children yield to their hearts, bringing about righteousness becomes their purpose; and their actions, "without compulsory means" as antecedents, will give evidence of their foremost desires to be true to what they, themselves, believe to be right.

Finally, is there a formula? A prescribed string of words? No, the words don't count. Any righteous thing can be said when the eye of the parent is set on leading the child to trust in the Lord "and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement" (Mosiah 4:6).
Listen to Alma’s testimony of how his father handled Alma’s resistance to yielding his heart:

And again, the angel said: Behold, the Lord hath heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father; for he has prayed with such faith concerning thee that thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth; therefore, for this purpose have I come to convince thee of the power and authority of God, that the prayers of his servants might be answered according to their faith. (Mosiah 27:14)

And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

Now, as my mind caught upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there.

But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God. (Alma 36:17–23)

The purpose of Alma’s experience was to soften his heart and to bring him to repentance. It was not to control or punish or compel him to do a task. It was to help him see himself as he really was—a child of God, and in a much broader perspective than the restricted vision he had of things when walking in his sins and persecuting the Church. And then, and only then, did his heart turn to righteousness, and a great and glorious good was manifested in all his works.

But bear in mind, your child’s heart may not soften. So what then? Do you go to plan B and set up the strong reinforcers and heavy induction? I guess some do, but they change their perspective: they
change their goal; they change what it is that they want their child to experience and learn. And the child learns that the parent is taking responsibility for the child’s behavior. The parent becomes “Satan” the manipulator, rather than “Jehovah” who appeals to integrity. Maybe there will be times when high power may be necessary and proper, in righteousness, but I suspect the spirit, most of the time, will move you to be long-suffering: to agonize over the child’s weakness, to bear this burden, praying with much faith as Alma and Mosiah did for their sons.

To summarize: when the heart softens and the light penetrates, the child gets a glimpse of something. His or her acts of repentance make it possible for the child to feel burning inside the unfeigned love that the parent has, to taste the love and the mercy and the remission of sins. This love grows into an exceedingly great joy. What a moment before was darkness and could not be seen is now transformed and experienced in its fulness. It wasn’t the parent who moved—it was the child who moved. The child moved to holy ground through repentance and felt the sacredness of unfeigned love that always flows from a tender and righteous parent. And the child gave love and the two embraced. The two came together and are one in keeping the most important commandment of all. Don’t you see? The business of parenting shouldn’t be on shaping and engineering a child to conform and comply to each little behavior that comes along. The most cogent business of parenting is to teach faith, justice, repentance, mercy, and obedience to the law. A child who understands these principles and lives by them softens his or her heart. And the desire to do right guides that child’s life—even in the parent’s absence.

What parents should be about is trying to help their children have a desire to fully stop their resistance, to follow the dictates of their hearts. And in abandoning the resistance, children want to do what they know in their hearts to be right. Chastisement does not focus on any specifics. What a child, an adolescent, a mate knows about an intention, in knowing the intent of his or her heart, already senses the rightness or wrongness in it as part of the knowing. A specific misbehavior is seldom targeted. People will do what they know to be right if their hearts are right and if they have abandoned their resistance.

How does a parent err? A parent errs first in targeting a specific behavior—in today’s language, in pinpointing an undesirable behavior and making it an objective that needs to be changed. Then the parent errs in setting up antecedent contingencies (reinforcers) which have the power to control the outcome of the child’s behavior. This has the
effect of focusing the child’s actions on mechanistic performance of behaviors and away from the issue of repentance and a soft heart which, when the heart is right, frees the child to do any and all behavior, and do it right. It also has the effect of shifting the responsibility to the parent for the child’s actions. These erroneous procedures seldom lead the child to repentance and they seldom lead the child to the feelings and expression of unfeigned love.

I would like to end by telling you of my experience of a child’s heart being softened. The child is my daughter, Kristin. (We call her Tina.) Very few words were said but there was a lot of atmosphere in an unlikely setting. For a few days, a few summers ago, Tina had been acting like a holy terror around our house, demanding whatever came to her mind. At this time she was only four. We knew something had to be done. She simply had to see what she was doing. She was like a sticky fly annoying everyone for whatever she got out of it.

I thought I knew exactly what to do. She needed to experience opposites. She needed to see the difference between the bitter and the sweet so she could have a point of reference. I swept her up into my arms and on that midsummer, late afternoon day I carried her into the garage. The doors were closed, and we sat on the steps going down from the house, and I explained: “Tina, I can’t let you act like this to your family. I need you to know that it is a privilege to live in our house, to be close to our family, and to have all the things we have. And you just need to understand that along with that privilege comes a need for you to cooperate with others.” (The problem of cooperation and the idea of privilege, while specific behaviors, were only excuses to get to the real issue—her perceptions.)

“You are about to experience what I mean,” I went on. “For the rest of this day and until tomorrow you are going to live in the garage. The garage isn’t a bad place: You can play with my tools—here is some wood and here are some nails and glue; you can bring out these old toys we have in storage that you used to play with; you can play with the cat. I will bring you a sleeping bag and you can sleep here on this carpet or in the back seat of the car.”

Then I left. Before the door had closed she was screaming her head off. I monitored her crying through the door. Occasionally she would stop crying long enough to holler out some kind of promise that she thought would be appealing to me. After each promise she would wait a second, and then, as if she knew it would not help her cause, she would bang on the door and again begin crying. In about ten minutes her crying stopped. With her sleeping bag under my arm I opened the door. When she saw me standing there with the sleeping
bag, she become totally sober, her eyes wide open. There was no doubt left in her mind that I meant what I had said.

I sat again with her on the sleeping bag that I had rolled out on top of the carpet remnant we kept in the corner of the garage. I picked up where I had left off. “Tina, we have just got to cooperate with each other in our home. I don’t think you realize just how nice it is in our house. Do you like watching the TV? Well, tonight you won’t get to watch it. Do you like eating with us at the table? Well, tonight I will bring you a plate of food out here. Do you like your nice soft bed and the company of your sister in your room when you go to bed? Well, tonight you will be out here alone. Do you like to wrestle and play Billy Goat Gruff with me on the carpet? Well, tonight we won’t do that before you go to bed. All these things you like are things we do with each other because we like to cooperate. I think you need to think about whether it is better to cooperate with each other or bother each other. In the morning I would like you to tell me what you think. Just know this, Tina. I am your dad, and I wouldn’t ever turn you out into the street or let anything bad happen to you. But all of us in the house cooperate, and because we all cooperate, we enjoy each other. Tina, I want you to think about something while you are out here. I want you think about what it would be like if all of us acted toward each other the way you have been acting. What would it be like if Mom bugged me, and Paul bugged Shawna, and Sabrina bugged you, and we could do that all we wanted. Would it be privilege to live in our house? You think about it.”

In a few minutes her dinner was ready. I handed it to her without saying a word. As I turned to leave I heard this little voice that had mellowed out. It had changed already. It sounded so submissive.

“It has changed already,” she said, “could I have just one thing?”

“Yes, Tina, you surely can. What would you like?”

“Could I have my pillow, Dad?”

“You surely can, sweetheart.”

I turned to leave and once again this tender voice called out “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Could I have just one more thing?”

“You surely can, sweetheart. What do you want me to bring you?”

“I’d like to have my pajamas, please,” came her reply.

“Oh, yes, Dad should have remembered that,” I said.

When I returned with the pillow and pajamas, she had finished her supper. I picked up the plate and left. There was no resistance. There was no crying or forlorn face. She was ready to face the night.
It was about 6:30 P.M. I really don’t know what was going on inside her. But she looked peaceful and free from any fear. By 7 o’clock I could hear no movement outside, so I opened the door for a peek. She was in the sleeping bag sound asleep. I checked on her periodically. She hadn’t moved a twitch by 10 o’clock, when I went down to watch the news.

As soon as the news was over, I made one last check before going to bed. As I was coming up the stairs from the familyroom, I experienced one of those special visions fathers are privileged to have occasionally about a child, giving unambiguous direction in what they should do. I saw that little tike all alone in that enormous dark garage wake up at 2 in the morning. I felt her feelings as if they were my very own. I knew that there was no way that she would be able to handle the strangeness of that place alone. I knew that there was only one thing that I could do. I went back to the closet, got my sleeping bag, and rolled it out on the floor beside her and crawled in. And just as I had seen, at 2 A.M. Tina woke up. For a moment, she was lost, but almost instantly she sensed my presence, recognized my breathing, and whispered, “Dad?” I was awake. (Dads don’t do as well as four-year-olds on the concrete floor.)

“Yes, sweetie, it’s your dad,” I gently reassured.

“Oh, Daddy,” came her expression of relief, “can I get in your sleeping bag with you?”

“You sure can.”

I have never been snuggled so closely in my life. She was a new child. She had come to me and had felt my presence and the love that I have for her. Her heart was soft; she was repentant. She was at peace. It was all over. She had transcended. And she fell to sleep. She slept in total trust.

At dawn we sat up in the sleeping bag and looked at each other. Her countenance was pure love. Her first words were “Dad, I think I know what it means to co-a-pooh-wate.” But that isn’t all she knew. She knew the sweetness of repentance and felt the gratitude of mercy. She felt a full measure of her daddy’s love for her. She had experienced giving up the awful pains of loneliness and replacing them with the exquisite joy of a soft heart.

She was transformed. Her soft heart filled her with unfelt love. For days her love blessed our lives. She made her bed. She played with her baby sister. She picked things up. She sang and danced. She offered to help her mother. She was charity. (We had experienced the unfelt love—the kind that seeks recognition and praise: “Look at how nice I ate my dinner; see how I picked up everything in my room. I’m
special, aren't I, Daddy?" But this was different. Everything she did was done with an eye single to the glory of God, of others, of her parents, of her siblings. There was a reverence, a holiness about it. All her behavior was right. Her every thought was to do right.

As I reflect on this, I have come to understand how untrained parents, guided by the Spirit, can rear righteous children. They teach them the first principles of the gospel: faith, repentance, baptism, justice, mercy. They pray, they keep the commandments, and they read the scriptures. They are available. Their love is unfeigned. And the children are free. And when our children realize that all that we have is theirs, what joy will fill our bosoms knowing that it will be for their good.

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References


