

Editorial: More Loving Than God? (1)

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An Argument by Open Theists and Hypo-Calvinists

In a very public clash at the University of North Texas in 2019, the prominent Open Theist, Jesse Morell, made various outrageous and blasphemous arguments defending his heresies against Emilio Ramos.¹ For example, he asked Ramos if homosexuality was God's plan or if abortion was God's plan. He understands that we believe that God works all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph. 1:11), though he fails to appreciate the distinction between what God has purposed should happen and what moral behaviours God approves or disapproves. Ramos quite rightly confronted him with the cross, the centrepiece in all history of God's eternal plan. When asked if the cross was God's plan, after attempting to evade the question, Morell eventually weakly conceded that, if people sin, God can work it into His plan but that the cross ought to be viewed as an exception (of course, the crucifixion of the Son of God is the most atrocious sin in all of history while also being preeminent in God's plan). In fact, Romans 1:21-27 teaches us explicitly that homosexuality is a judgment of God upon idolaters as He gives them up to their own "vile affections" which are "against nature" according to the "lusts of their own hearts."

Running headlong with the presumption that God's eternal counsel regarding all things implies that God therefore approves of all sins ever committed, Morell quotes Jeremiah 19:5 as support for his redefinition (really denial) of God's omniscience (he defines omniscience as God knowing all things which can be known, which in Morell's fantasy excludes much of the future if not all). He claims that this verse teaches that abortion was never in God's plan and that to teach otherwise would be to approve abortion. In fact, what Jeremiah 19:5 teaches is that God never commanded those idolaters to offer up their sons with fire nor did it ever enter His mind to command such

¹ Jesse Morell, "Gnostic Cult Leader Emilio Ramos Rebuked for Heresy & False Doctrine," *Biblical Theology with Jesse Morell* (17 April, 2019) (youtu.be/nO4w2eVXOy8).

an abominably wicked form of worship. But every heretic has his verse. And every heretic will be judged by the whole of God's Word which they wrest to their own destruction.

In this editorial, we are particularly interested in one of Morell's arguments. Jesse Morell argued, "I'm more loving than your God! I want all these people to be saved!" This is worth considering not only because it is the same argument used by Arminians against Calvinism but because it is also the same argument used by hypo-Calvinists against Calvinism. It is also worth considering because it is easily misunderstood and often answered poorly if answered at all. It ought to be answered if for no other reason than to bear witness to the truth of God's love and glory against all blasphemers, whose mouths ought to be stopped by sound words (Titus 1:11; 2:7-8), but also because the answer is edifying to God's people. Before advancing, we ought to present a broad definition of love with which we may agree in common. Later we will make this definition more specific and full from a proper consideration of Trinitarian theology. Love desires and, therefore, seeks its object's highest good. This is the working definition implied by Jesse Morell's argument. It will suffice for now.

A Blasphemous and Hypocritical Argument

The first thing to notice about this argument is that it is blasphemous. The same argument was used by Richard Dawkins:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.²

What Richard Dawkins implies is that he is morally superior to the God of Scripture. In his rage against God, Dawkins fails to acknowledge that any such objective moral comparison would wholly undermine his argument for athe-

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006) (goodreads.com/quotes/23651-the-god-of-the-old-testament-is-arguably-the-most).

ism. But Jesse Morell's argument is blasphemous for exactly the same reason. Scripture teaches that God has declared the end from the beginning and has done all that He has pleased (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 46:9-10; Amos 3:6-7; Acts 15:18). That some are not saved is therefore according to God's most holy and inscrutable purpose (Ex. 9:16; Prov. 16:4; I Pet. 2:8). Morell, therefore, claims to be more loving than the true God of the Scriptures.

Although Jesse Morell would not agree, the hypo-Calvinists think they escape the force of this argument because they say there is a sense in which God wants the reprobate to be saved even though God's eternal purpose is not to save them. They say that there is a sense in which God loves the reprobate with a kind of lesser love. Having thrown up a smokescreen to avoid this argument themselves, they are not ashamed to turn it against Calvinists. Their smokescreen does not help them much, since Morell could still say that he loves all his hearers to the extent that he would actually save them if it were in his power to save them. He could then accuse these hypo-Calvinists of a hypocritical love, "You say that your God loves them and wants to save them and is able to save them, yet He does not. But I love all these people so that, if I could, I would actually save them." Still they don't hesitate to throw this same foolish and blasphemous argument at us. They put the argument to us in a less crass and more sophisticated manner, of course (as everything the hypo-Calvinists say or do must above all be sophisticated):

One writer suggests that a preacher ought to want all his listeners to be saved, while on the very next page he denies that God wants them saved. The implication of this is that we are more loving and kind-hearted than God.³

Is this not exactly what the apostle Paul teaches in Romans 9, that he wants the unbelieving Israelites to be saved, yet he confesses that it has always been God's purpose not to save many (vv. 1-15)? He has "great heaviness and continual sorrow," and he "could wish that [he] were accursed from Christ for [his] brethren" (vv. 2-3). Yet he immediately explains the reprobation of many to be God's eternal purpose, "that the purpose [*prothesis*] of God according to election might stand" (v. 11). He explains this election and reprobation in

³ Sam Waldron, *The Crux of the Free Offer* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2019), p. 33.

terms of love and hatred: “Jacob have I loved [*agapao*], but Esau have I hated [*miseo*]” (v. 13). I highlight the specific Greek words used because these are the simple keywords which expose the vocabulary employed by hypo-Calvinists. Paul also explains this election and reprobation in terms of God eternally wanting or willing to have mercy on some but wanting or willing to harden others: “Therefore hath he mercy [*eleeo*] on whom he will [*thelo*], and whom he will [*thelo*] he hardeneth” (v. 18). He also uses the term pity [*oikteiro*] in connection with mercy. What immediately follows is a defence of God’s righteousness in doing what He wants (or wills) with the thing that He has formed, just as the potter has “power [lit., right] over the clay” (vv. 19-24).

The hypo-Calvinist says God wants the reprobate to be saved but Paul explicitly denies this. Do they imagine that God willing is something different to God wanting? Such a distinction will not help them. Our Authorized Version never uses the term “want” to describe God’s will, since that term is reserved for an expression of lack [*hustereo*] and God never lacks anything. The only word translated “want” (sometimes translated “lack”) is never used with respect to God (whether the noun or verb). Then the hypo-Calvinist is left with the verb translated “will” as in Romans 9. So, then they must admit they are saying “God wills them to be saved” in direct contradiction to the word of the apostle.

Perhaps they can evade this contradiction by speaking of a “desire” of God (as if that could be in contradiction to His will). Immediately after the passage cited above, Paul declares, “my heart’s desire [*eudokia*] ... is, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1). Does this help them? Did Paul not also “will” [*thelo*] them to be saved (cf. Acts 26:29)? Jesse Morell could argue that Paul, therefore, loved the reprobate more than the God who “will” not have mercy on them. David Silversides was not ashamed to throw this argument against us, speaking of Paul’s “will”:

Christ’s apostle longed and prayed for the conversion of all his hearers. “And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds” (Acts 26:29). This being so, then of what is that compassion in the preacher a reflection? Are we to be more loving, in scope, than God?

Are we to show compassion to all who hear and yet some of them be in no sense whatsoever the objects of God's compassion? The idea is completely contrary to the concept of ambassadorship and of acting "in Christ's stead."⁴

Remember that this same Paul explicitly said that God will not have compassion on some (Rom. 9:15). Perhaps Silversides ought to have taken his argument up with the apostle instead of against us?

A Flawed Argument Based on Love's Scope

The implication in this argument, as with Jesse Morell's, is that love may be considered morally superior based upon its scope, or even that one whose love is narrower in scope may not demand others to love according to a different or broader (or presumably narrower) scope. Silversides develops the argument as related to the demands of God's law as the effulgence of God's perfect moral character:

Much as we respect Professor Engelsma, we are alarmed that he should be content to represent the example of God's love as exemplifying that required of us in kind, but not in scope. God's law is the outshining of God's holiness as it bears on human conduct in this world, and yet we are being encouraged to believe that God commands us to love more broadly than he does. The introduction of such a conflict between God and his own law is utterly inadmissible.⁵

This argument concedes however, that the law is the radiance of God's moral perfection "as it bears on human conduct." He concedes, therefore, that there is necessarily a difference between God's righteous standard as it relates to Himself as God and as it relates to human as humans. For example, the command, "Thou shalt not steal," is nonsense when applied to God, since all things belong to God and God has the right to do whatever He will with His own (Matt. 20:15). The command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," is

⁴ David Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical and Reformed* (Edinburgh: Marpet Press, 2005), p. 56.

⁵ Silversides, *The Free Offer*, p. 26.

likewise nonsense for God who is spirit and has no “parts, or passions” (John 4:24; *Westminster Confession* 2:1). Similarly, the command, “Honour thy father and mother,” is meaningless for the One who is sovereign above all with all authority in heaven and earth. The command, “Thou shalt not kill [i.e., murder],” is also nonsense if applied to the God who has the right to give and to take life as He wills.

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me:
I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there
any that can deliver out of my hand. For I lift up my hand to
heaven, and say, I live for ever. If I whet my glittering sword,
and mine hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance
to mine enemies, and will reward them that hate me
(Deut. 32:39-41).

God’s law requires that we do not take vengeance but the reason given is that vengeance is the prerogative of God (Rom. 12:19). As it is not our place to decide who is elect and reprobate, neither do we have the right or privilege to restrict the scope of our love and our will for others to be saved as God does. Instead, our love must meet the scope of that demanded by God’s law. In all things, our will must be subject to God’s revealed will, and He has not revealed to us who is elect and who is reprobate.

For each one of us, the right scope of our love is determined by what God has made us (creation), where and when God has placed us (location) and in what personal circumstances God has led us (relation). These three considerations show us to whom love is required and what particular kind of love is required. As limited complex creatures bound by time and space, these considerations are appropriate and necessary for us. In contrast, God’s love is almighty, eternal, immutable and simple as He is almighty, eternal, immutable and simple. With respect to mutable creatures in time and space, only the expression or outworking of God’s love differs as He brings it to perfection in us (Jer. 31:3; I John 4:12). Unlike man, God is not created. Unlike man, God is far above, and fills all time and space. Unlike man, God’s personal circumstances cannot, and do not, change (Mal. 3:6).

These three considerations for the proper scope of our love are summed up

in the very language of God's command for us to love. We are told to love our *neighbour* as ourselves. Also this love is to be of a similar character to our love for God, though secondary. This love for God primarily and our neighbour as ourselves secondarily is so fundamental that it is the principle for the entire law:

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).

Christ made a point to correct an error of the Pharisees regarding our love for the neighbour (Luke relates this immediately following the above summary of the law; Luke 10:25-37). Our neighbour whom we must love may include our own personal enemies, i.e., those who have done wrong to us. Christ illustrated this with the example of the Samaritan. The Samaritans were enemies of the Jews in that they had historically treated them wickedly so that up to the present there was still bitter enmity between these two (Neh. 4:7-9). The Samaritan who treated the injured Jew as his neighbour showed himself to be a neighbour to whom a special debt of love was owed. More than that, in treating the injured Jew as his neighbour, though the Jews were enemies of the Samaritans, the Samaritan showed that love for the neighbour includes love for the neighbour who is our own personal enemy.

There are especially three reasons for the debt of love owed to the Jew in this case. The first consideration is the common humanity of the Jew and the Samaritan, as creatures of God and descendants of Adam, who were created in God's image. The second consideration is the proximity of the Jew to the Samaritan. God placed the Jew in the Samaritan's path and, therefore, the Samaritan may not turn a blind eye to the needs of this person on his path (Prov. 28:27; Isa. 58:7). The third consideration is the particular and desperate need of the Jew, which requires specific acts of love from the Samaritan in this case.

When the legal scholar who thought to test Christ answered that the neighbour of this Jew was the one who showed mercy to him, despite the fact that the Jews and Samaritans were enemies, Christ approved of his answer.

This shames the legal scholar, who thought that the scope of love demanded of him did not include his enemies (as it shames the priest and Levite who ignored their Jewish neighbour), not merely because the Samaritan *showed* himself to be a neighbour, but because the Samaritan loved his enemy *even though the injured Jew had not shown himself to be a neighbour*. This love of the Samaritan is characterized as showing mercy, which is the same keyword used in Romans 9 to describe the mercy of God shown to some and not to others.

We do not know if the Jew himself showed himself neighbourly to the Samaritan who helped him (this was not the point of Christ telling the anecdote or parable). Did the Jew thank the Samaritan? Did the Jew repay the Samaritan's kindness? Did the Jew resent that a Samaritan had come to his aid? Such resentment is common among bitter enemies. Christ teaches us that the Samaritan did not concern himself with whether the Jew would show himself to be neighbourly either before or after showing mercy but was content simply to depart after making preparations for his care. We do not need to know whether our enemy will be neighbourly to us in considering the scope of our love. Our charity is always employed ultimately from a position of ignorance at least in some measure. Not so with God's love which is always according to His infinite determinative knowledge of all things.

That the scope of our love is determined by our creation by God is clear in that we are not called to love rocks and plants and animals as we are called to love our fellow man, although a certain respect and care is required of us as responsible stewards under God over these creatures of God (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15; Ps. 8:5-8; Prov. 12:10). We are not even called to love angels as we are called to love man, even though angels are themselves moral and rational creatures unlike the brute creation. The angels which did not fall would also be far more very worthy objects on account of their holiness, moral perfection and ministering service to the saints compared to fallen man. With regard to creatures then, man is to be primary object of our love though all love for the creature must be subject to love for the Creator. The Creator Himself is not bound by a debt of love to anyone or anything (Job 41:11). The Potter is under no obligation to love the vessels which He makes, especially if He determines to make some prepared for glory and others fitted for destruction (Rom. 9:21-23). God does not become more or less loving by His work of

creation or by creating some to be objects of His love and others not to be. That is His right as the sovereign Creator. Since we are mere creatures, God alone must determine the proper scope of our love.

The scope of our love is also governed by our location in God's providence, both the time of our earthly life and its geographical bounds. We have a greater debt of love towards a man we meet on the street than towards someone in a far off country. It would be a wicked hypocrisy to suppose to exercise great care for people in a foreign land while neglecting the debt of love to those in our own locality. Charity begins at home, as the saying goes.

To state the obvious, we have a greater debt of love to people in the present than people who lived in the past (not only because they are now removed from us, in heaven or in hell, to await the final resurrection of the just and the unjust). A man may love his wife dearly but when she passes away his primary responsibility is to the living especially, for example, his children who may be left now without a mother. It would be unnatural and disgraceful for a man to spend his time decorating the tombs of his beloved ancestors and thinking of them, while sparing no thought for his brothers and sisters in the present. Likewise, our love for our children in the present is more important than the consideration for our hypothetical descendants. We must have some care for the future and the people who will live then, but our primary concern must be with the present, especially as we do not know when our Lord will return.

Finally, the scope of our love must be determined by our relation to others, though first of all our relation to God. A philanderer or a polygamist is not more loving than a faithful husband to one wife because he supposedly loves more women. In this case, limiting the scope of our love is a virtue. Since a husband and wife are one flesh, their calling to love one another is higher than, for example, the calling of a husband to love his friends or even his children, though the children ought both to be the fruit of this love and to share in the enjoyment of this loving fellowship between husband and wife in the family. We would call it sheer hypocrisy if a man went out of his way to love strangers more than the members of his own family. In fact, neglect of one's own family is grounds for excommunication from the Christian church as the sin of apostasy from the faith or worse as it overturns even natural affections (I Tim. 5:8). In his commentary on this verse, John Calvin observes,

He says that they who do not care about any of their relatives, and especially about their own house, have “denied the faith.” And justly; for there is no piety towards God, when a person can thus lay aside the feelings of humanity. Would faith, which makes us the sons of God, render us worse than brute beasts? Such inhumanity, therefore, is open contempt of God, and denying of the faith.

Similarly, it would be perverse for a man to show more love to his enemies than to his friends. Such a man would be rightly considered a disloyal traitor, no better than a Judas Iscariot. Friends have a special duty of love to their friends (Prov. 27:10). Christians have also a special duty of love towards their brothers and sisters in the church above the love required for those outside the church (Gal. 6:10). The work of the diaconate is to the faithful not to the world of unbelievers (I Tim. 5:3-16). Yet, as we noted from the outset, God’s demand for the scope of our love still may encompass our enemies and this love especially is intended to illustrate our Father’s love (Matt. 5:44-48). God has loved His enemies specifically in that Christ has died for us with the result that we are saved (Rom. 5:6-10). Though we were enemies, Christ called us His friends and showed us the love that is greater than any other, that a man lays down his life for his friends (John 15:12-16). In that Christ did not die for all and not all are saved, we know that God does not show this love to all His enemies without exception (John 17:9). This is His sovereign right, but He neither gives us this right to choose among our enemies, nor does He give us this power to turn our enemies into our friends by our love as He does. In these important respects, our love for our enemies necessarily differs from God’s love for His enemies as is appropriate for mere creatures, yet the similarity remains such that the main idea of an unconditional love for an unworthy antagonistic object is reflected.

God also has other purposes with our love for our enemies besides this reflection of His love. The parallel passage in Luke’s gospel concerning love for our enemies emphasizes the proper motivation of receiving a reward from God when we expect no reward from the object of our mercy (Luke 6:27-36). This was no new doctrine but the same motivation given in Proverbs:

If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he

be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD shall reward thee (Prov. 25:21-22).

The explanation that coals of fire will be heaped on his head is reiterated in the New Testament in connection with our not avenging ourselves (Rom. 12:19-21). The interpretation given is that in this way evil will be overcome with good and that this is to give place to the wrath of God who will repay evil with vengeance. This explanation is twofold. God may bring our enemy to repentance by the coals of fire heaped on his head as our goodness shames them for their evil against us or else our goodness will heap up condemnation against them on the day of judgment. Either way, we have confidence that we overcome evil with good. If our love for our enemies may then be an instrument in God's vengeance, where is the argument that objects to the scope of our love being different to the scope of God's love?

At this point, we must turn the argument around against Arminians and Open Theists like Jesse Morell, as well as against hypo-Calvinists. If you are "more loving than God," have you ever considered that the fault may lie with your unwarranted universal love which does not submit to God's revealed will, rather than with God's perfect particular love for those whom He has chosen? When the wicked king of Israel, Ahab, asked for help in his war against the Syrians, King Jehoshaphat of Judah responded in a very generous and loving manner, saying, "I am as thou art, and my people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war" (II Chron. 18:3). But for helping this wicked king out of love for him, Jehoshaphat was rebuked by the prophet Jehu: "Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD" (II Chron. 19:2). Jehoshaphat, in his misguided love, had been helping king Ahab in his rebellion against God who had determined to destroy Ahab for his wickedness.

God has called us His friends (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 41:8; John 15:15) and, therefore, the proper scope of our love must be limited by what is called a holy or perfect hatred of those whom God counts as His enemies. Loving God's enemies, so that we have fellowship with them or help them in their wicked or godless pursuits, would be to betray God's friendship of us (James 4:4). Not only does Scripture specifically teach this but Scripture also gives many

examples of the thoughts, words and deeds of this righteous hatred. Consider the words of the holy psalmist with which we must admonish one another as we sing (Col. 3:16):

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies (Ps. 139:19-22).

The psalmist is assured that God will destroy the wicked who speak against Him and take His name in vain. Such destruction is not an act of love for those whom the psalmist calls God's enemies. But the psalmist must align himself with God's cause and submit himself to God's judgments against His wicked enemies. Therefore, the psalmist confesses his own holy hatred for them also as the friend of God. He calls God to examine and know his hatred to be a "perfect" hatred. This hatred consists here in three things: agreement with God's judgment so that he prays for this judgment, being grieved with them such that he calls them to depart from him and counting them as his own enemies insofar as they are God's enemies.

If we ourselves must not love every single person so that we want every single person to be saved, how can we teach that God loves everyone and wants to save everyone? If we are not commanded to love everyone without exception, how can we demand that God loves everyone? In the next editorial, DV, we will look at more of these specific examples of righteous hatred of God's enemies by the saints and then consider by what criteria Scripture itself measures love, since we have seen that scope is not a valid measure of love at all.