

Love Is a Law, Not a Reward

Adam S. Miller

1.

Love is the substance of God's law.

As Paul puts it: "If there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Rom. 13:9). Or, as Jesus summarizes the law: "On these two commandments"—love of God and love of neighbor—"hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40). What's more, this love can't be treated as a special reward. "Ye have heard that it hath been said," Jesus acknowledges, "thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:43–44).

This is the law: love even your enemies.

What would happen if I actually believed this? What would happen if I stopped treating love as a reward and finally started obeying love as a law?

To help sketch an answer to this question, I want to revisit two familiar stories. The first is by Arnold Lobel. The second is by Jesus. But both stories, really, are about love.

2.

The first story is called "The Garden." It's from Arnold Lobel's classic collection of children's stories *Frog and Toad Together*.¹

1. Arnold Lobel, "The Garden," in *Frog and Toad Together* (Harper Collins, 1971), 18–29.

In this story, Toad finds Frog working in his garden. Toad thinks it is a beautiful garden. Frog agrees. "It is very nice," Frog says. "But it was hard work."²

Now Toad wants a garden like Frog's. Frog offers Toad some seeds, instructs Toad to plant them in the ground, and promises that Toad, too, can soon have a beautiful garden filled with flowers.

Toad can hardly wait. He runs home and plants the seeds.

Toad tells the seeds to start growing. He walks up and down the rows, but nothing happens.

Toad leans in and says more sternly, "Now seeds, start growing!"³ Still, nothing happens.

Finally, Toad gets down on his hands and knees, fills his lungs, and bellows the same command. But still, nothing happens.

Provoked by all the commotion, Frog comes running to help. "What is all this noise?" he asks. Frowning, Toad confesses his seeds won't grow.

The problem is obvious to Frog. "You are shouting too much," he says. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."⁴ He advises Toad to give his seeds a few quiet days in the sun and rain; then they will start to grow.

Toad backs off, hoping not to frighten his seeds anymore. But that night, Toad looks out his window to find that, even with all the quiet, his seeds still haven't started to grow. "My seeds have not started to grow," he says. "They must be afraid of the dark."⁵

So, Toad lights some candles and takes them out to the garden. All through the night, he reads his seeds a long story to help them not be afraid. He spends the whole next day singing songs to his seeds. Then he spends the whole next day playing music for his seeds.

But the seeds still won't grow.

"What shall I do?" cried Toad. "These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"

Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.

"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. "Look at your garden!"

Toad looked at his garden.

Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.

"At last," shouted Toad, "my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"

2. Lobel, "Garden," 18.

3. Lobel, "Garden," 21.

4. Lobel, "Garden," 22.

5. Lobel, "Garden," 24.

“And now you will have a nice garden too,” said Frog.

“Yes,” said Toad, “but you were right, Frog. It was very hard work.”⁶

3.

I’m like Toad.

I want good things, but I don’t actually know how gardens grow. Ignorant about the true nature of things, I tell myself stories instead. I make up ridiculous stories about why nothing will grow. And these stories, of course, aren’t actually about the garden. They’re really about me.

And so, buying my own ridiculous stories, I’ve dedicated my life to doing impossible and useless things. I’ve dedicated my life to doing very hard work that is, on its own terms, utterly beside the point. And truth be told, I suspect I’m especially like Toad—that is, adorably earnest and decidedly dim-witted—when it comes to religion.

Recently, I’ve come to what feels like a long-gestating but now obvious and unavoidable conclusion. After nearly fifty years of shouting at my seeds to grow, I’ve concluded that shouting may not work. After nearly fifty years of trying to earn God’s love—of trying to prove I deserve that reward—I’ve reached the blunt and sobering conclusion that God never asked me to do this.

To understand how I’m like Toad, you must see just this: I’ve spent the better part of my life trying—and failing—to obey a commandment God never gave. Like Toad, I’ve had the whole thing backward. I’ve had life upside down.

There is no commandment in all of scripture—delivered from any pulpit by any prophet in any age—to make myself into someone God could finally love. There is no commandment to make myself into someone perfectly lovable. It is impossible to keep this commandment—this imaginary commandment to be perfectly lovable—because God never gave it. And, for this same reason, it is impossible to break this commandment. It is impossible to break a commandment God never gave.

There is, instead, always and only the single, eternal, unconditional commandment to do love’s work: to love God with all my heart, and then to join God in the hard work of loving others.

My problem is that I have, all along, been telling myself a ridiculous story about how love is a reward when, in truth, love is a law. Love cannot be deserved. Love is always a commandment to be obeyed—full

6. Lobel, “Garden,” 27–29.

stop—and never a prize to be earned. Love is a verb, not a noun. Love is a work I must join, not a reward I can get. Love requires my participation, not my perfection.

This is the secret hidden from the foundation of the world. This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4.

Jesus has tried, again and again, to tell us this. “I will open my mouth in parables,” he said. “I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35). So, consider this parable—maybe the most famous parable of all—with its own stubborn secret hidden in plain sight.

“A certain man had two sons,” Jesus tells us, “and the younger,” acting as if his father were already dead, asks for his share of the inheritance (Luke 15:11–12). The son receives it. He wastes it. He starves. Woken by his hunger, this son then “came to himself” (Luke 15:17). “I will arise and go to my father,” the son thinks, “and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven” and so “am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:18–19).

I am this younger son. This is me. This is how Toad and I think.

Rather than treating love as a law, the younger son treats love as a reward he has failed to earn. He treats love as something he could—with very hard work—deserve. He treats God’s law as a measure for whether he deserves to be loved.

This son thinks love is about being loved and earning love, not about loving others.

He thinks his seeds didn’t grow because he didn’t shout at the ground long enough or hard enough. So now he thinks he doesn’t deserve to be loved.

No outcome could be more predictable and inevitable than this. Treating love as a reward, I will always find that I’ve failed to deserve it. And having failed to deserve it, I will feel guilty.

But why have I failed? Because I’m not good enough or strong enough or “perfect” enough to be loved? Or because I’ve been wrong about what love even is?

To understand the truth about love, I must also come to understand the truth about guilt. I must see that guilt is the inescapable shadow cast by every backward and disobedient attempt to deserve love and be loved.

In this way, guilt is a telling symptom. It’s a powerful sign that something is wrong, that something in me is painfully out of joint. The trouble

is that, ignorant as I am, I constantly misread this sign in light of my own ridiculous stories. I constantly misinterpret this symptom as a sign that God does not love me because I do not deserve to be loved.

This, though, is not what guilt means. What this powerful sign actually means is that I've been doing the wrong thing. I've misunderstood what love even is.

If we compare God's law of love to a spyglass or telescope, we might describe my mistake like this: As a sinner, I've got the right instrument, but I've spent my whole life looking through the wrong end. I've got God's law, but I'm using it backward. This law was meant to magnify love, to call me to love, to show me how the world is already filled with God's love. But by misusing God's law, by looking through the wrong end of the telescope, I've produced the exact opposite effect. I've made God's love seem incredibly small and impossibly far away.

As a prize, love will always look impossibly small and far away.

But as a law I must obey—as a work I must join—love is always magnified and always at hand.

5.

In Jesus's parable, however, the disobedient son isn't the only one trapped inside this sad story about love being a reward. In fact, the whole point of Jesus's parable may be that the obedient son doesn't see the truth either. Both sons think love is a conditional reward. Both sons think love can be deserved. They've just reached different conclusions about whether they deserve it.

The father greets the younger son's return with an outpouring of love. But when the elder son sees this, he doesn't join his father in obeying love. Rather—tellingly—he gets angry.

When the father comes out and asks him to join the celebration, the elder son bitterly replies: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29).

The elder son, just like his younger brother, has God's law backward.

The elder son thinks love is a reward—and he thinks he's earned it.

If, like the younger son, you try to earn love and then feel like you've failed, you will be filled with guilt and hopelessness. But if, like the elder son, you try to earn love and imagine you've succeeded, you still won't find love. Instead, you will—predictably, inescapably—be filled with anger, bitterness, and judgment. And this anger will estrange you from love and strand you on an island of vanity and indignation.

The younger son finds himself unworthy of love and, so, hates himself.

The elder son finds himself worthy of love and, so, hates his brother.

Hate rushes to fill every vacuum created when God's law is used to decide that some people—perhaps others, perhaps me—haven't earned the reward of love.

So often, I am this elder son. This is me. This is how Toad and I think.

It's impossible to misuse God's law as a weapon for excluding others from love without also harming myself. Whenever I treat love as a conditional reward, I inevitably turn Jesus's commandment to "be ye therefore perfect" on its head (Matt. 5:48). This commandment to be perfect does not describe what I must become to finally earn God's love. Rather, "perfect" describes the kind of divine love God already has for me—and, then, the kind of love I must also obey.

This is the difference between perfection and perfectionism. Perfectionism is love upside down and backward. Perfectionism is the desire to be perfectly lovable, not the desire to love perfectly. And unlike God's perfect love, perfectionisms of all kinds are predictably harsh, angry, and unloving.

Perfectionism is a bitter and frustrating project. Perfectionism withholds love and disobeys the command to love. In this way, perfectionism is a crippling form of disobedience and an arrogant dismissal of God's law. Perfectionism is a sour form of moral relativism that undercuts God's law by rendering love relative to some imagined scale of merits.

God is perfect. God is not a perfectionist.

6.

In this parable, the father is the only one who thinks like God. The father is the only one who knows how gardens actually grow. He's the only one who knows what love even is.

Obedient to God's law, the father isn't guilty or angry. He loves both his sons.

When his younger son returns, full of guilt and shame, the father doesn't hesitate to love him. "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Humbled, the younger son protests, "Father, I . . . am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:21). The father, though, ignores this ridiculous story and says "to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet . . . and let us

eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:22–24).

The father knows both what God's law says and what God's law is for. He knows how to love. The father, in other words, knows how to render righteous judgment.

In Matthew 7:1, Jesus famously commands: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

But the Joseph Smith Translation amends the verse as follows: "Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged; but judge righteous judgment" (JST Matt. 7:2). There are, then, two forms of judgment: unrighteous judgment and righteous judgment. What divides one from the other? These forms of judgment are, I think, cleanly divided by whether we're treating love as a law or as a reward.

If we think love is a special reward reserved only for those who have "earned" it, then we'll use God's law to judge what people deserve. We'll use God's law to divide up the world into those who deserve to be loved and those who don't. We'll use judgment as a weapon. This is unrighteous judgment.

Righteous judgment, though, does just the opposite. Rather than judging others in a way that prevents me from loving them, righteous judgment treats love as a law that commands me to love them, even if—especially if—they are my enemies and do not deserve it.

Unrighteous judgments ask: *Who* deserves to be loved?

But righteous judgments ask: *How* must I love?

Unrighteous judgments treat love as a rare reward, while righteous judgments treat love as a moral law. When I practice unrighteous judgment, I not only condemn others, I condemn myself to expect and receive this kind of judgment. "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged," Jesus says (Matt. 7:2). Having misunderstood what love even is, I condemn myself to live as someone cut off from love.

But when I obey love's law, I stop judging who deserves to be loved and exclusively use God's law to judge how to love.

In other words, obedient to love, I live like the father in the parable. I judge like the father. I obey God's law like the father.

When the elder son angrily demands to know why his obedience hasn't earned him more love than this younger brother, the father doesn't get angry—but he also does not endorse the elder son's treatment of love as a reward he's earned. Rather, the father simply promises all his love and repeats the same thing he said when he welcomed the prodigal

home. “It was meet that we should make merry . . . for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32).

This love, this compassion, the father says, was “meet”—that is, it was required, it was necessary, it was commanded by God’s own law.

And this divine law never asks if you deserve to be loved.

This divine law asks only if you are dead or alive, if you are lost or found.

It only asks how best to love you.

This is the truth about how gardens grow.

And this—while it is still very hard work—is work of an entirely different kind.

Adam S. Miller is a professor of philosophy at Collin College in McKinney, Texas. He earned an MA and PhD in philosophy from Villanova University and has published more than a dozen books for both academic and popular audiences, including *Letters to a Young Mormon*, *Original Grace*, and *The Christ Child*.

This article was adapted from Adam S. Miller’s presentation at the Faith Matters Restore conference on October 14, 2023, in Sandy, Utah.