



THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

Supplemental reading by C.S. Lewis

Because God loves us in Christ unconditionally and eternally and because there is nothing we can ever do or fail to do which would separate us from the love of God, we become infinitely important and valuable to God. Our relationship to God is based upon and grounded in who Christ is and what He has done, not on who we are or on what we do. Yet this divine love is the opposite of indifference with regard to the quality of our lives. This divine, unconditional love does not support or encourage the status quo, but is intolerant of it. If it were not, it would not be true love. Love desires that its object will be the best it can be, and love will persevere and work tirelessly to accomplish that highest good in its object. Such love is strong and may appear to us when we are its recipients to be stern, intolerant, and even unreasonable. God loves us, and for that reason He works tirelessly in us and upon us to progressively produce obedience in the place of disobedience and Christ-likeness in the place of self-centeredness. It is about this kind of love that C. S. Lewis writes in the reading we are including for your further reflection.

-Ron Shaw

By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness; and in this we may be right. And by Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self-happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy.

What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.” Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that

God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.

I might, indeed, have learned, even from the poets, that Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness: that even the love between the sexes is, as in Dante, “a lord of terrible aspect.” There is kindness in Love: but Love and kindness are not coterminous, and when kindness (in the sense given above) is separated from the other elements of Love, it involves a certain fundamental indifference to its object, and even something like contempt of it. Kindness consents very readily to the removal of its object—we have all met people whose kindness to animals is constantly leading them to kill animals lest they should suffer. Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. As Scripture points out, it is bastards who are spoiled: the legitimate sons, who are to carry on the family tradition, are punished. It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are

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exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all the records, that though He has often rebuked us and condemned us, He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.

The relation between Creator and creature is, of course, unique, and cannot be paralleled by any relations between one creature and another. God is both further from us, and nearer to us, than any other being. He is further from us because the sheer difference between that which has Its principle of being in Itself and that to which being is communicated is one compared with which the difference between an archangel and a worm is quite insignificant. He makes, we are made: He is original, we derivative. But at the same time, and for the same reason, the intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any that creatures can attain with one another. Our life is, at every moment, supplied by Him: our tiny, miraculous power of free will only operates on bodies which His continual energy keeps in existence--our very power to think is His power communicated to us. Such a unique relation can be apprehended only by analogies: from the various types of love known among creatures we reach an inadequate, but useful, conception of God's love for man.

The lowest type, and one which is "love" at all only by an extension of the word, is that

which an artist feels for an artifact. God's relation to man is pictured thus in Jeremiah's vision of the potter and the clay, or when St. Peter speaks of the whole Church as a building on which God is at work, and of the individual members as stones. The limitation of such an analogy is, of course, that in the symbol the patient is not sentient, and that certain questions of justice and mercy which arise when the "stones" are really "living" therefore remain unrepresented. But it is an important analogy so far as it goes.

We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Here again we come up against what I have called the "intolerable compliment." Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life--the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child--he will take endless trouble--and would, doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumbnail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less.