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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



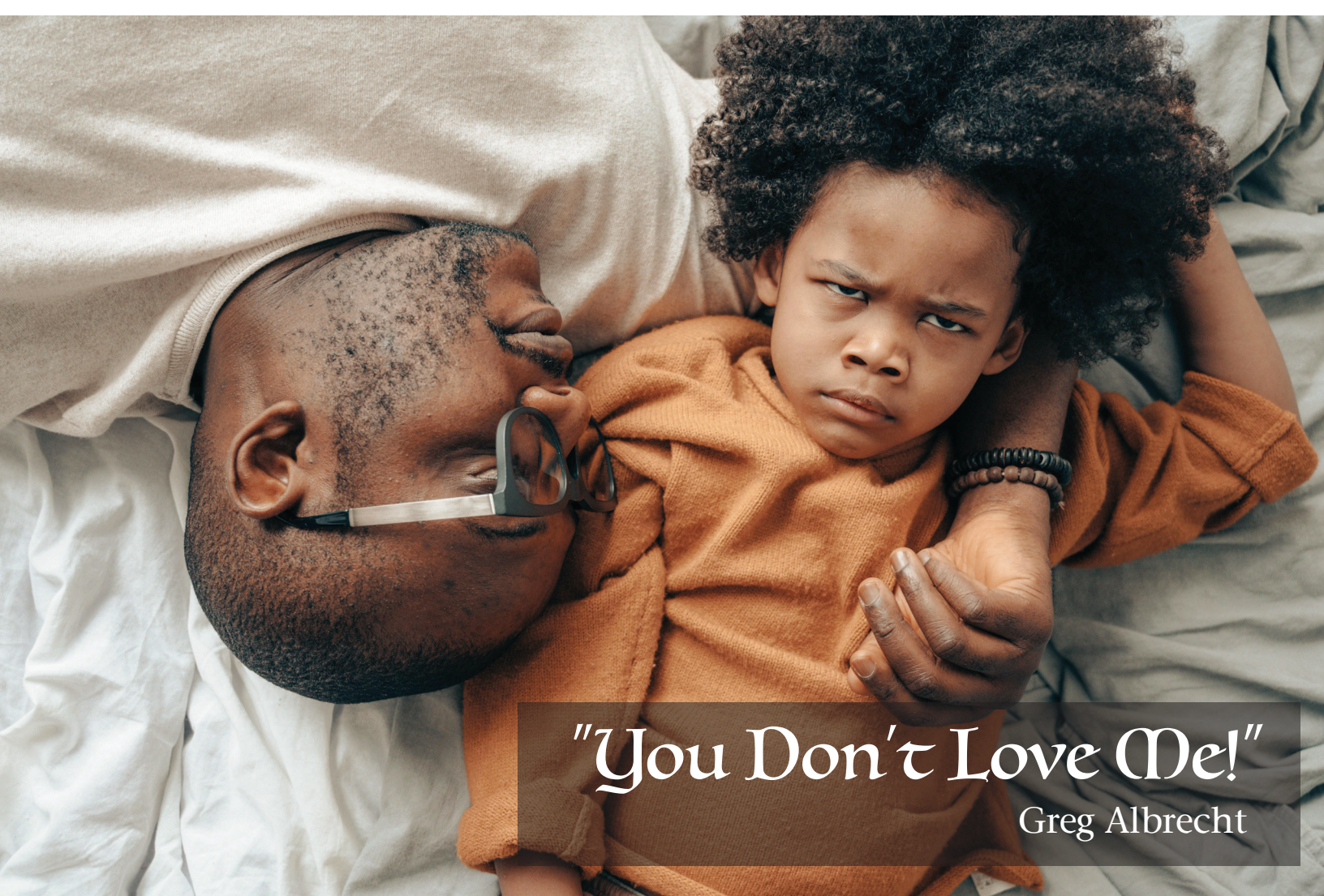
"You Don't Love Me!"
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God, the Lover of Life

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*"God is love, but..."
Nothing!*

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"YOU DON'T LOVE ME!"

If you are a parent or a spouse or a grandparent, you have no doubt heard the manipulative ultimatum, "*You don't love me!*" from a family member who attempts to guilt you into doing what they want you to do. When you were growing up you may have heard the accusation, "*You don't love me!*" from a parent who expressed disappointment in your behavior. You may have been the target of the painful announcement, "*You don't love me!*" which was quickly followed by a reprimand for your shortcomings—"after all I have done for you."

The statement, "*You don't love*

me!" is often a contrived strategy designed to coerce another person into appropriate behavior, at least according to the person using the tactic. Does one find and maintain true love via emotional blackmail? Is giving someone (whether that someone be a spouse, a child or a friend) exactly what they want *true love*?

True love of course includes gifts, but *true love is never for sale*. Gifts are often given to others in return for what the giver believes is love, but gifts in that context prove only how much someone is willing to pay to achieve the illusion and feeling of love.

"*You don't love me!*" might be used by a teenager as a complaint or a recrimination directed at a

parent, when the parent doesn't allow the teenager to stay out later, go to unsupervised activities and eat as much junk food as the teen desires. Teenagers, desperate to get their own way, often complain to their parents that their friends all get to have more freedom, and that those friends feel sorry for them because they have such unloving, uncaring "stone age" parents.

The definition of love, at some point in the 20th century Western culture, continuing to gain momentum into this 21st century, has experienced a radical shift favoring love as at least partially identified by self-centered entitlements one receives. The proof and

illustration of love came to be popularly understood as a favorable response to benefits one receives from another. Such a definition of love reduces it to a transaction, not a self-sacrificial gift. The condemnation of another's failures "*after all I have done for you*" is based on a definition of love and relationship as transactional—a contract.

Several generations in Europe and North America have grown up believing that their parents owe them, the government owes them, their school owes them and then later, if they marry, their spouse owes them. Sadly, the generations before them have permissively indulged them and now they exist in a miserable bubble of entitlement. Thus, they have come to believe love is defined by the benefits and entitlements they are owed.

Many today speak of their search for a "soul mate"—an elusive dream-person whom they characterize as satisfying.

Employees feel justified in doing as little as possible on the job because they feel that their employer is rich anyway, and their employer owes them. This explosion of self-centered "love" has been accompanied by an ever-increasing emphasis on rights—so that many today believe they have "rights" no one else in history ever had. It seems many North Americans believe they *deserve* "rights" and "entitlements" the majority of other humans on earth never will enjoy.

Self-absorbed people feel entitled to have everything when and how they want it, and are therefore often depressed and bitter, because in their estimation they will never achieve the admiration, attention and love (as they define it) they feel they so richly deserve—and *it's all someone else's fault!*

TELLING GOD HE DOESN'T LOVE US?

When it comes to our relationship with God "you don't love me" is a charge many feel justified in laying at his feet when they attempt to pressure, bargain and demand that he gives them what they want. On the other hand, the mind of Christ stands opposed to this grasping, manipulative focus on self-interest. The mind of Christ is filled with vulnerability and humility, the complete opposite of a grasping, self-absorbed focus.

"*You don't love me!*" is a transparent attempt by someone who feels unloved and demands the love they feel they deserve. In the spiritual sense, the

accusation, "*You don't love me!*" is often leveled at God by someone who attempts to gain God's favor by living by law, not by grace. "*You don't love me!*" is a demand and "*after all I have done for you*" a complaint directed to God.

We spend so much of our lives hoping to be recognized and rewarded ... and there is nothing inherently wrong with being recognized and rewarded, and certainly nothing wrong with recognizing and rewarding and thanking others. But the recognition we receive from other humans feels good for a moment, and then, like the wind, it is gone. Like the labels on food one purchases in the grocery store, human approval often has a shelf-life, an expiration date.

This mushrooming love affair with "me, myself and I" has negative consequences in our recognition of the love God has for each of us. Self-absorbed people (and we all are, naturally, at some level self-absorbed) want God to love them because of who

The real, but hard truth is this: Everything we have and everything we have accomplished—all our trophies and achievements—will one day be but ashes. By contrast, God's love and grace never fades away, nor will it vanish into thin air.

they are and what they have done—human pride craves divine recognition.

We crave the recognition of others, we crave it though it is fleeting and one day forgotten. One day the accolades we desperately care about will be empty and meaningless. We look for love, as that old song goes, in all the wrong places, because we are physical and highly susceptible to the fool's gold of the cheap, the passing, the quick and the transitory.

When we look for love in all the wrong places we invariably will feel let down, empty and disillusioned... so we move on, looking for another cheap thrill, another cheap religious pill or prescription or drug that will give us a temporary high. But we will always come crashing down when God is not at the center of our quest for love.

When it comes to trying to be good, we run in vain to please religious laws and standards, only to find that we are incapable of measuring up to such standards and we feel shame and guilt for our failures. Once again, only God's love and grace

fulfills us and gives us eternal treasures that will never pass away.

VULNERABILITY, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY & GRATITUDE

Prideful selfishness is a spiritual disease. What is the cure? Vulnerability, kindness, generosity and gratitude!

When Breath Becomes Air was written by Paul Kalanithi, just after he had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Actually, his wife Lucy helped him write the book, and contributed her own thoughts. Paul was 36, growing in immense prestige in his profession as a neurosurgeon. He and his wife had just welcomed their little daughter into the world.

And then came Paul's out-of-the-blue diagnosis of stage four metastatic terminal lung cancer. His wife Lucy wrote about what happened and how it affected their lives: *"His cancer diagnosis was like a nutcracker, getting us back into the soft nourishing meat of our marriage. We hung onto each other for his physical survival and our emotional survival, our love stripped bare. We joked to close friends that the secret to saving a relationship is for one person to become terminally ill. Conversely, we knew that one trick to managing a terminal illness is to be deeply in love—to be vulnerable, kind, generous and grateful."*

Each one of us, apart from God, apart from Jesus, the Great Physician, is terminally ill, spiritually. The recognition of our plight is very much a part of

deepening our relationship with God. Knowing and fully being at peace in God's love entails recognition of total dependence on God for everything, and that he gives his love in the time and manner he best determines. God's love is not given to us because it can be earned and deserved, but because his love is not measured or assessed by how humans (including Christ-less religion) assign worth.

There are times when we feel God doesn't love us because he



doesn't seem to be doing what we feel he should. But we are using the wrong standards—the wrong measurements—the wrong devices—to identify, define and recognize his love.

Though we as humans do accuse God that he doesn't love us, that is not the case at all. It's just that his love is not based on our performance and deeds, and his rewards are not a pat on the back, a raise, a trophy, or a miraculous healing from a terminal health condition.

God's love is the gift of

himself—he gives us his life. He gives us his death, in the person of Jesus. Jesus announced his love for you and me on the top of a hill, stripped naked and impaled to a cross. Some were jeering and making fun of him—telling him to save himself. Irony of ironies—the human response to the greatest demonstration of love ever was catcalling and condemnation.

As Jesus died on his Cross, there was no gratitude or recognition about the earth-shattering love being demonstrated.

There was no commendation or applause from those who stood by. It was the once-and-for-all event when God loved us first, in the way he determined. And the aftermath? The Jesus Way has been lived ever since, for almost two thousand years now, by Christ-followers. Christ-followers have no need to manipulate God. We're not able to send the Father, Son and Holy Spirit away on a guilt trip. We never need accuse

God of not loving us. God knows. You and I know. *God loves us!*

The miraculous and beautiful reality enabled by the Cross—this monumental, once-and-for-all demonstration of divine love—produces in the lives of Christ-followers vulnerability, kindness, generosity and gratitude. That's the mind of Christ and the love of our Lord and Savior—lived in us by God's grace. □

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