

## **“And the Greatest Love of These is *Agape*”**

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Based upon John 21:15-19; 1 Cor. 13

What makes someone get up every day and don layers of hot protective gear to be able to go into dozens of hospital rooms with people fighting a virus that could very well kill them too? What makes someone leave family behind to go to a country on the other side of the globe to fight for the freedom and safety of people he has never met, or to help them cope with hunger, poor housing, lack of water, or other situations she did not cause? What makes people protest for justice for others when they already have it themselves, or give credit to others for work they did themselves? One answer to all of these questions is *agape*, the last and most important kind of biblical love that we’ll be considering this July. *Agape* is what C.S. Lewis called “gift love.”<sup>1</sup> It is love that is shared not because it wants or needs something back, but because its very nature is to give. For that reason, *agape* is sometimes translated as “charity.” But it’s about far more than giving money to non-profit organizations. *Agape* is the love of God, the kind of selfless love that God shared with us in Jesus Christ and calls us to share with our neighbors— our enemies as well as our family and friends.

I remember a teenager in a youth group I lead years ago saying, “I’m not going to love my enemies! What was Jesus thinking? Who could possibly do that?” She wasn’t alone in having misconceptions about *agape*. For centuries people have confused it with the other kinds of love that we have considered this past month. We have thought that God wants us to love everyone as much as we love our families, or with the same passion we have for our spouses, or the same affection and loyalty that we have for our friends. We have thought that to love with *agape* means that we have to martyr ourselves or accept bad behavior in others. We have thought that it was impossible for humans to love with *agape* at all. All of these thoughts reveal misunderstandings of what *agape* is and is not.

The best definition I know of *agape* comes not from C.S. Lewis, but from the apostle Paul, in today’s text from *First Corinthians*. For decades at least, maybe longer, people have thought Chapter 13 is a poetic tribute to *eros*, which is why this text is probably the number one text used in weddings.

### **Type “me” in the comments if you used this text in your wedding.<sup>2</sup>**

It’s not wrong if you did use this text in your wedding. It is a beautiful tribute to love, and as I said when we considered *eros* in the context of marriage, it is the call of Christian marriage to witness to God’s love in Christ through the way that spouses love each other. But that is what Paul was writing about here— the love of God in Christ, *agape*, not *eros*. Additionally, he wrote the tribute not to celebrate how great the Corinthians were at embodying this kind of love, but to illustrate to them just how poorly they were practicing it. It’s the oldest preaching trick in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy- Reflections on the Psalms- The Four Loves -The Business of Heaven (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), 213.

<sup>2</sup> A dialogue was conducted via the Facebook comment section during the live-stream of the sermon.

book. Instead of telling people all the things that they are doing wrong, which can shut people down, you preach on how faithful people are not that way, and hope they'll put two and two together. The Corinthian congregation was torn apart by conflict. There were people in it who thought they were better than others because of how they came to faith. There were people who thought they were better than others because of their wealth, their knowledge, or their particular spiritual gifts. People were acting out in all kinds of ways. So, in his tribute to *agape*, Paul not only named the qualities which characterize divine love, in so doing, he also summarized the qualities that were lacking in the Corinthian Christians' behavior.

"*Agape* is patient," Paul began, which tells us immediately that they were not. "It isn't envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way; it's not irritable or resentful; it doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing; it rejoices in the truth." There are a few different ways to translate this list of transgressions. But whether your translation says "puffed up" or "arrogant," or "commit shameful behaviors" or "rude," and rejoice in "injustice" instead of "wrongdoing," it is still easy to cross reference these bad behaviors with the rest of the letter because in the other chapters of the letter Paul criticizes people for misbehaving in exactly those ways. But even without doing that it is easy to see that the common thread between all of these bad behaviors is human self-centeredness. God's love in Jesus was not self-centered. It was self-sacrificing in the extreme.

In a few minutes I'll get to why we can still show *agape* without having to die on a cross as Jesus did. But in the meantime, it's important to note that the Corinthians weren't especially bad people. In fact, if recent studies are true, they were actually more selfless than we are. Social scientists have been able to demonstrate empirically, looking, for example, at the frequency with which certain key words appear in books – words like "getting" versus "giving," "obliged" versus "choose," – that people have been getting progressively more selfish and self-centered over the last two hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Our culture prioritizes individual needs and desires over communal desires, so much so that another study has demonstrated that Americans now are not as easily motivated by communal needs as people from other parts of the world are. We've seen that a lot lately with the issue of wearing masks. But in the study, people from other parts of the world became more altruistic and compassionate when reminded: "We're in this together." People in the United States, in contrast, especially those of European descent, were not very motivated by those words. They were more motivated by phrases that focused on them as individuals, such as: "Be the change you want to see."<sup>4</sup>

That would seem to suggest that we have even less of a chance of successfully gifting people with *agape* than the Corinthians did. But there is hope for us yet, to be found in the gospel lesson from *John*. In the post-resurrection conversation that it records between Jesus and Peter, we hear how Jesus redeemed Peter from the guilt caused by his triple denial of Christ, by giving

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<sup>3</sup> The books used were both American and British. See e.g. Gray, Richard, "Language in books shows how we have grown more selfish," THE TELEGRAPH, Aug. 7, 2013; retrieved July 23, 2020 from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/10229133/Language-in-books-shows-how-we-have-grown-more-selfish.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ferro, Shaunacy, "Science Confirms the Obvious: Americans Are Selfish," POPULAR SCIENCE, Jan. 28, 2013; retrieved July 23, 2020 from <https://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-01/science-confirms-obvious-americans-are-selfish>.

him three opportunities to declare his love. “Simon Peter, do you love me?” Jesus asks three times, and three times, with increasing hurt, Peter says, “Yes Lord, you know I do.” In the Greek, this exchange is interesting. Jesus says the first two times, “Peter, do you *agape* me?” and Peter replies, “Yes Lord, I *phileo* you,” using the verb form for friendship love, *philia*, I talked about last week. The third time Jesus says, “Peter, do you friend-love me?” and Peter replies a third time, “Yes Lord, I friend-love you.” No one is quite sure what to make of this. *John* tends to use *agape* and *phileo* interchangeably in his gospel, so the switch could mean nothing more than he liked variety in his verbs, or it could mean that Jesus recognized he was asking too much of Peter, and met him where he was. In any case, the point of the conversation was, “if you love me, then feed and take care of my sheep. Start with your love for me, and then transfer that love to others.” Basically, as Jesus gave gift-love to Peter, he wanted him to turn around and gift that love to others in the form of caring for them. Peter ended up doing this to such a degree that his *philia* love became *agape* love. He served Christ selflessly until he also died on a cross.

Based upon stories like this, the great Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr argued that Jesus’ social ethic is grounded in the individual.<sup>5</sup> The goal of Jesus’ teachings was for people to live in peace and abundance in community. The goal still is for the common good both in the Church and the world. But that goal starts with the individual. That means that we who value individual autonomy above all don’t have to learn how to love and live as community before we can practice *agape*. We can focus on changing ourselves, and let others do the same. If we all strive individually for *agape*, then by definition, the whole community will benefit. All *agape* comes from God because it is divine love. So, all we have to do is take what God gives us in Jesus, and try to pass it on without poisoning it with human selfishness. In order to do that, we must work individually on nurturing the long list of qualities Paul names in Chapter 13. We must practice patience, humility, graciousness, cooperation, forgiveness, and truth-seeking, knowing that all of our knowledge is partial and our spiritual gifts temporary. We must ask ourselves whenever we relate to others, not “What’s in it for me?” but “Why am I doing this? Is it just for me, or is it for them too?”

As Peter’s story shows, we can work our way toward *agape* by starting with the loves we already know. *Eros*, *storge*, and *phila* all can become *agape*, or at least be mixed with it. C.S. Lewis believed that *storge* was the easiest to start with because a parent’s love for a child is already more unconditional and selfless than other loves tend to be.<sup>6</sup> But you can practice *agape* within the confines of a romantic relationship or a friendship too. You just try to be more selfless. Try to think about the needs and gifts of the other. Once you have some comfort level with doing that, then you can expand the beneficiaries of those thoughts and practices, trying to bring wider and wider circles under that umbrella of grace and understanding and responsibility in your heart.

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<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr: *Love and Justice Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, D.B. Robertson, Ed., (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Although Lewis was Christian, Buddhism also teaches this perspective by telling practitioners to: “Imagine you were the mother of everyone you see in a past life.” Myers, Ralph E., “*Grasping for Agape: Unconditional Love and the Human Mind*,” BRAIN WORLD MAGAZINE, Winter 2019; retrieved July 21, 2020 from <https://brainworldmagazine.com/grasping-for-agape-unconditional-love-and-the-human-mind>

This is much harder to do with people you consider your enemies, of course. But loving your enemy doesn't mean that you have to feel the sentiments that you feel when you look at your own child or your best friend or your spouse. As Jesus tried to make clear to Peter, it means caring for them, not adoring them or endorsing their behavior. Paul certainly did not endorse the behavior of the Corinthians. His letters are filled with criticism of them. But he loved them and cared for them nonetheless because he knew each and every one of them was beloved to God. He knew because Jesus died for them.

Fred Buechner has said that he thinks about this as he walks through crowds, "Jesus died for you. Jesus died for you."<sup>7</sup> It helps him to resist slipping into indifference and/or judgmentalism. I guess for me personally, I think more about what I would do if I found the person injured and I was the only one around— sort of a Good Samaritan situation. If you found someone bleeding by the side of the road, wouldn't you get them help, even if his politics differed from yours, or she had said something awful about you at the PTA? That instinct to help is the *agape* that God puts in our hearts through Christ. Now I'm not so prideful or delusional as to think that I could do this with someone if I knew they had hurt someone I cared about deeply. But it does help to remember that to love your neighbor with *agape* does not mean you have to drum up in your heart the same kind of lovey-dovey feelings you would have for a spouse, or adoration you would have for your child, or even allegiance you would have for your best friend. You don't even have to like the people a lot. The love that enables us to love our neighbor is the love we have for Christ, not for them. Jesus' conversation with Peter illustrates this. "If you love *me*, do this for them," Jesus said. In other words, "Do this not because they are worthy, but because I am worthy of your love."

If we had read the rest of this conversation, we would have seen also that we do not need to love God's sheep to the point of martyrdom. Jesus predicted that Peter would be martyred, but when Peter then asked, "What about him?" pointing to John, Jesus said, "If it is my will that he remains until I come what is that to you?" John lived a full life witnessing to the Gospel. Peter died on a cross. *Agape* leads us down different paths— and that's OK. The point isn't to try to hurt yourself to please God, it is to try to love God by loving others throughout your life.

**Can you think of anyone who has witnessed to God's love this way to you in your lifetime? If you like, type the person's name in comments.**

I read two incredible stories of *agape* recently. One was of a little six-year old boy who put himself between a vicious dog and his little sister because he knew his sister wouldn't survive otherwise. He was badly hurt; his face will bear the scars forever. But when he was asked why he did it, he said, "I figured if one of us was going to die it should be me."<sup>8</sup> The other story was of a skydiving instructor who was taking someone on her first jump. Once they were in the air, they realized that both of their parachutes wouldn't open properly. So, as they rapidly approached the ground, he positioned himself in front of the woman so he would hit the ground first. Miraculously they both survived, but while the woman had fixable injuries, the man was

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<sup>7</sup> I remember watching Buechner say this in an interview but have not been able to find the source again.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., O'Kane, Caitlin, "Celebrities hail 6-year-old as a hero after aunt says he saved his sister from a dog attack" CBS News, July 17, 2020, video at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dog-attack-dog-saves-sister-chris-evans/>

paralyzed from the neck down. When asked about why he did that later, the man said, “I couldn't have lived with myself if anything had happened to her. It was my job to protect her. I did what I had to do, the only thing to do.”<sup>9</sup> Again, these are extreme acts of selflessness. We shouldn't give up on practicing *agape* because we are not as courageous or selfless. I would argue it's still *agape* if you let someone in front of you in line or mow the lawn of your elderly neighbor. It's still *agape* if you forgive a colleague instead of holding a grudge, and if you give financially to support someone who may or may not be telling you a true story of suffering. It's *agape* to wear a mask, even if you aren't risking your life working in the ICU– and definitely if you are. Humans are capable of *agape* because God enables us to be.

Paul ended his tribute to love by saying that “Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.” I think these days we need all three of these things. We need faith in Jesus Christ to know that we can trust that God is with us even when the world is in turmoil. We need hope to keep us from despairing in the present and working toward a future with less brokenness and pain, and we need love to keep us connected to God and one another. Richard Hays says that “[*agape*] love is the foretaste of our ultimate union with God, graciously given to us now and shared with our brothers and sisters.”<sup>10</sup> May we cherish that foretaste, and share love in all its many forms, so that God's planned future will be our reality in this life and the next. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> “*Hero skydiver paralysed 'by saving parachute woman in freefall,'*” THE TELEGRAPH, June 2, 2010; retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/7795617/Hero-skydiver-paralysed-by-saving-parachute-woman-in-freefall.html>

<sup>10</sup> Hays, Richard B., *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 231.