

God is Love

A Series on the Character of God: Part 2

Of the various Greek terms for “love” in the New Testament, the noun “agapē” is always used in the context of a) God’s love, b) a human being’s love of God, or c) the divine love one may have for another that is invoked by the Holy Spirit. While only authoring five books of the New Testament (John, 1-3 John and Revelation), the apostle John uses “agapē” in its truest form more than any other author including Paul.

All three contexts of how “agapē” is used in a divine sense can be seen in this example:

Beloved, let us love (**agapaō**) one another, for love (**agapē**) is from God; and everyone who loves (**agapaō**) is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love (**agapaō**) does not know God, for God is love (**agapē**). By this the love (**agapē**) of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love (**agapē**), not that we loved (**agapaō**) God, but that He loved (**agapaō**) us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:7-10)

When attempting to understand this character of God’s “agapē” love, it becomes apparent that it is a very difficult concept to grasp. Because other Greek terms for love does not apply, one can be certain what “agapē” is not:

Phileō - This Greek term is the most commonly used term for love and refers to the general attraction to a person (friend or family) or thing (god, food, sports, etc). It is understood as love in the context of friendship or devotion.

Storge – This term refers to a familial love that is natural between a parent and child.

Erōs – This Greek term describes a love that desires to have or take possession. It is in reference to a love between a man and woman that reflects a longing or craving desire. This type of love has a transcendent aspect as it involves sensual desires, expression and experience.

Through John’s eyes, the nature of God’s love stands in stark contrast to “phileō, storge,” and “erōs,” which are conditional and involve some form of benefit. God’s love, as John 3:16 indicates, is not one in which the one who loves gains any personal benefit; instead, its self sacrificing act for the unholy is what makes God’s “agapē” love unfathomable.

For God so loved (**agapaō**) the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

John’s prologue provides a dimension of time that contributes to the incomprehensible depth of God’s “agapē” love (John 1:1-4). As Jesus is the means of expressing God’s love, His preexistence before His birth infers that God’s love was His purpose from the very beginning.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. (John 1:1-4)

Moreover, among all of the New Testament authors, only John makes the connection that Jesus Christ is where the Word of God is the Act of God. Lost in the English translation, the significance of this becomes more apparent when understood in Hebrew, because the Hebrew term for truth is defined as a correspondence of one’s word with one’s actions in historical reality. God’s love is true and made visible when He sent and self sacrificed His only Son Jesus.

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Educated as a teacher of the Law, the apostle Paul speaks of God's "agapē" love within the context of the Old Testament and Israel's election. However, God's "agapē" love is not conditional as the Mosaic Covenant might infer (Ex 19:5-5); rather, it was an unconditional promise God made with Himself to Abraham and to his children. Because the beneficiary of the Abrahamic Covenant was determined by faith, not genetics, Paul sees God's "agapē" love as God's sovereign choice to love Abraham and his descendants of faith who are obedient towards holiness (Col 3:12-13; Gen 18:19; John 8:39; Rom 4:16).

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved (**agapētoi**), put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. (Col 3:12-13)

For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Gen 18:19)

They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. (John 8:39)

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (Rom 4:16)

As John records the words of Jesus, to experience and know God's "agapē" love means to have faith in His Son. One can only know Jesus with "agapē" love that is expressed by keeping His commandments. And for those who "agapē" love His Son, God will "agapē" love them. With genuine "agapē" love for Jesus (faith), both He and His Father will be with the Believer.

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves (**agapaō**) Me; and he who loves (**agapaō**) Me will be loved (**agapaō**) by My Father, and I will love (**agapaō**) him and will disclose Myself to him." Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?" Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves (**agapaō**) Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love (**agapaō**) him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. (John 14:21-23)

"O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love (**agapaō**) with which You loved (**agapaō**) Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:25-26)

God's "agapē" love is a new reality that is beyond the human concept of love that is described by "phileō" and "erōs." Supernatural in origin, God's "agapē" love is the motivation for love between human beings. And the expression of God's "agapē" love is proof of one's faith.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love (**agapaō**) one another, even as I have loved (**agapaō**) you, that you also love (**agapaō**) one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love (**agapaō**) for one another. (John 13:34)

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love (**agapaō**) his brother. (1 John 3:10)

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If “agapē” love cost God what was most dear to Him, what are the implications to Believers? Jesus explicitly explains that “agapē” love is really about in two commands:

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘You shall love (**agapaō**) the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love (**agapaō**) your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:34-40)

The Jews were unaware that the Law and the whole Old Testament at that time were an expression of God’s “agapē” love and balanced with the standard of His holiness.

Just as easily, New Testament Believers may be unaware of what Jesus means by “agapē” love. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains what “agapē” love is by providing His interpretation of a prevailing Jewish thought:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love (**agapaō**) your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love (**agapaō**) your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matt 5:43-44)

The sense of self sacrifice of “agapē” love becomes palpable. The depth of God’s “agapē” love is piercingly felt as one faces the difficulty and perhaps the impossibility of complying with Jesus’ imperative. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that there is suffering in the course of expressing God’s “agapē” love, suffering of which God recognizes.

But I say to you who hear, love (**agapaō**) your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love (**agapaō**) those who love (**agapaō**) you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love (**agapaō**) your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. (Luke 6:27-35)

Of all of the supernatural characteristics of God, Believers are asked to mimic only one - His “agapē” love (1 John 3:16). Experiencing God’s “agapē” love and attempting to express “agapē” love may provide a personal glimpse into the essence of His character of love. However this author wonders if we only deceive ourselves in thinking we can understand “agapē” love.

Compliance to the second commandment seems feasible when the cost is understood as “your neighbor,” but what if the cost is unquantifiable in “agapē” loving your enemy?

Perhaps more revealing is that Jesus felt it necessary to issue a new command to “agapē” love your fellow Believer regardless of any differences let alone theological (John 13:34).

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And God does not “agapē” love for “agapē” love’s sake. In view of His Son’s sacrifice and these two commandments, the primary purpose of “agapē” love is initial salvation for non-Believers and sanctification salvation for Believers. God’s character of “agapē” love provided the means and motive by which one may be obliged to fulfill God’s command, “be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16).

Agape love can be best understood in the following manner:

It is the love of the Father who desires that His children are with Him forever.

It is the love of the Son who knows He's the only means that others will know of His Father's love for them.

It is the love of God's children who know that everyone can be adopted by the Father who accepts them as they are.

It is selfless and encourages others to grow closer to the Father.

Agape love is the divine love of God’s family. But because only Jesus knows who's in the Book of Life, we are commanded, in a sense, to presume everyone is potentially in the family.

While the verb "agapaō" is found in in first century extra-biblical texts to express today’s cultural meaning of "esteeming another", the noun "agapē" is only found in the Bible. It is a supernatural term that avails its meaning to those who believe in God and read His word. Without the constant reminder through Bible study, one will forget and assume the natural and cultural meaning of the verb “love” as "esteeming love" without any concern for one’s holiness.

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).