

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-12-31—WHAT IS AGAPE LOVE?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

In the New Testament, the word translated *love* is most often is from Greek noun *agape* or verb *agapao*. But just what is agape love? How does it differ from other kinds of love? Is it even important for God's people to understand?

First of all, agape love comes *from* God: “Beloved, we should love one another because **love [Gk. *agape*] is from God**; and **everyone who loves [Gk. *agapao*] has been begotten by God**, and knows God.” (1 John 4:7). That makes sense because God **IS** love¹. This means that agape love is not something that we can have, feel, or understand unless it is given by God because He is the **ONLY** source of it. In fact, having agape love in us requires that we are begotten with God's Holy Spirit! In simple terms, it has to be planted in us. Agape love is not just the result of a single infusion, it is living and must be growing in us.

That means that agape love must differ from the love that humans experience naturally. Agape must be a special kind of love that is unique from all other forms of human love. To better understand agape love, look at the different types of human love. Since English really only has one word for “love”, a good approach is to look at the various forms based upon the Greek words:

DEFINITION: *Phileo* can be FONDNESS OR KINDNESS² toward people or it can refer to LOVE BETWEEN FRIENDS³. The latter is commonly called brotherly love. Love between close friends is called *philostorgos*⁴.

DEFINITION: *Storge* is FAMILIAL LOVE, which is love based upon the close bond that exists between parents and children as well as brothers and sisters. Note that *Storge* is not used in the Bible except in Romans 12:10.

DEFINITION: *Eros* is ROMANTIC LOVE between a man and woman. This involves deep feelings of respect, tenderness, and longing exclusive to a husband and wife. *Eros* was originally much more than sexual desire, but it became perverted even in ancient times. Sexual desire without love is called *lust*.

What is common to every one of these forms of human love? Each involve relationships where love is reciprocated; that is, all of them are based upon love that is jointly shared

¹ 1 John 4:8, 16.

² Acts 27:3; 28:2.

³ 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:7.

⁴ Rom. 12:10.

between people. For example, friendships only exist if both people have phileo love for the other. If one person has phileo love for someone else but the recipient does not return that phileo love, then they are not friends. Someone who hates us, regardless of our feelings toward them, is an enemy not a friend. The same principle is true among family members or between a husband and wife.

This is what distinguishes agape love. Jesus Christ said that the two Great Commandments are to agape love God and our neighbors⁵. But Jesus also gave us a new commandment to love brethren as He loves us Himself⁶. All of this makes sense intellectually, especially since the Law of God is intended to bring us to that understanding⁷. How hard is it to love those that love us? That is the basis for romantic love, familial love, or love between friends and exactly the point that Jesus made:

MATTHEW 5:45-47 So that you yourselves may be *the* children of your Father Who *is* in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and on *the* good, and sends rain on *the* just and on *the* unjust. 46 For **if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?** Do not the tax collectors practice the same *thing*? 47 And **if you salute your brethren only, what have you done that is extraordinary?** Do not the tax collectors practice the same *thing*?

What distinguishes agape love is that it not only exists between people who love us in return, but agape is the only form able to love those who do NOT reciprocate. Notice the fourth love commandment spoken by Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 5:44a But I say to you, **love [Gk. *agapao*—the verb form of *agape*] your enemies** ...

We are to have agape love for our enemies! Do we have *phileo*, *storge*, or *eros* love for an enemy? No! Only agape love can be had for someone who hates us. This is *why* it defines God. He IS agape love because "... **God commends His own love to us because, when we were still sinners,** Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). Also notice:

1 JOHN 4:9-10 In this way the love of God was manifested toward us: that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. 10 **In this act is the love—not that we loved God; rather, that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**

JOHN 3:16 For **God so loved [Gk. *agapao*] the world [even though all were sinners]** that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.

⁵ Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-33; Luke 10:27.

⁶ John 13:34; 15:12; Eph. 5:2; 1 John 3:23; 4:21.

⁷ 1 Tim. 1:5.

Givem all of this, perhaps we can define agape love as:

DEFINITION: *Agape* is GODLY LOVE. It is unconditional whether it is reciprocated with love or hatred. Agape love is not natural to flesh and blood; therefore, it is received only through the begettal of the Holy Spirit by God. In an ideal sense, a person who has agape love does not hate others, including enemies. This is the highest and purest form of love.

When Jesus said that we are to show agape love toward our enemies, He meant it in every regard. We are to:

MATTHEW 5:44b ... bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you,

Agape love is not manifested by doing good for our enemies grudgingly. Good works must be a motivation of our hearts, not from a discipline of strict obedience. How is this possible? Paul wrote, “And above all these things **put on love [Gk. agape]**, which is the bond of perfection.” (Col. 3:14). We are expected to have, and grow in, agape love. Agape love in us is truly the PERFECTION of our bond with God and others. With it, that bond truly runs deep. John wrote that “... **if we love one another, God dwells in us, and His own love is perfected in us.**” (1 John 4:12). This means that a relationship with God requires His agape love to LIVE IN us.

How do we know if we have agape love living in us? How does agape love grow in us? Look again at what Paul said, but this time notice the preceding verse:

COLOSSIANS 3:13-14 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another; even **as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive.** 14 And above all these things *put on* love, which is *the* bond of perfection.

God’s children are confronted with many offenses in life. It is HOW we deal with them that matters. If agape love is living in us, we will sincerely try to reconcile with others when offenses occur. It means that we want to forgive those who offend us or repent to those we ourselves offend. Agape love is a desire for all—even our enemies—to become eternal children of God.

Agape love also grows as we deal with offenses and trials. If we, regardless of offenses or our personal afflictions, seek to always treat others as the potential children of God, then it will develop. Agape love is without any expectation of return and it is strongest when we “put on agape love” while we are afflicted or suffering. Read carefully one of the most beautiful passages by Paul:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am **nothing [Gk. oudeis]**. 3 And if I give away all my goods, and if I deliver up my body that I may be burned, but do not have love, I have gained nothing [Gk. oudeis].

Did you notice the mention of *angels* in verse 1? Are they not perfect before God? We can speak as angels, understand all prophecy and mysteries, have ALL knowledge (everything that God knows), and have faith to literally move mountains but we are NOTHING BEFORE GOD without agape love. The Greek word for *nothing* is *oudeis*, which means absolutely nothing or cannot exist. In simple words, without agape love there is no salvation. Growing in agape love is hard because it means we must put aside all anger and hatred no matter what the provocation. Notice what is not agape love:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 Love is patient *and* is kind; love **envies not**, does **not brag** about itself, is **not puffed up**. 5 Love does **not behave disgracefully**, does **not seek its own** things, is **not easily provoked**, **thinks no evil**. 6 Does **not rejoice in iniquity**, but rejoices in the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

God begets His children with agape love. It is not natural to us and only comes from Him. It must be always be living and growing in us as we battle our carnal natures. It is out of agape love for God that we keep His commandments and Law. It is the motive for good works unto all, including our enemies. It is the foundation of God's eternal Kingdom. Agape love is all that matters when the end comes.

1 PETER 1:22 Having [cleansed] [Gk. hagnos] your lives by obedience to the Truth unto unfeigned brotherly love [*philadelphia*] through *the* Spirit, love [*agapao*] one another fervently with a pure [Gk. katharos] heart.

“Now **the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart** ...” (1 Tim. 1:5). Agape love begins with keeping God's Law. It starts with *phileo* love for others. But God is transforming us to be vessels of the purest form of love—agape!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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