

# Agape for Our Brother

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The word “love” is one of the most multifaceted in the English language. A preacher might use it to describe Christ’s affection for the lost, a teenager might use it to express his lustful infatuation with his girlfriend, and my niece Sara might use it to reflect her appreciation for her favorite food. It’s legitimate to use the word in each of those three circumstances, but this variation in possible meaning leaves “love” almost meaningless without help from its context.

Nearly any human language is going to have the same problem, and Koine Greek, the language in which the Bible was written, addressed the problem by having not one but four separate words for love, all of which are translated by the same word in our English Bibles. If we want to appreciate the nuances of meaning in the original text, then, we have to know what Greek love-word is being used where. This morning, we’re going to concentrate on the most common of those love-words and its use in a specific context. We’re going to look at *agape* for our brother.

## What Is *Agape*?

Naturally, the first part of this study must be to figure out what *agape* is. This portion of our service this morning will also help us to prepare our minds for the Lord’s Supper. We could begin by dragging out a heap of Greek dictionaries and tossing a bunch of different learned multi-page definitions up on the screen. However, I fear that much of the time, what commentators have said to clarify the meaning of *agape* has actually done more to muddy it. Instead, we’re going to turn first to the Scriptural **DEFINITION** of *agape*. We can find it in 1 John 4:10. If we want to know what *agape* is, we will never find a better example than when God sent His Son to die on our behalf.

This example tells us first of all that *agape* is purposeful. Jesus didn’t appear on earth by accident. Instead, His life and death were the culmination of a plan that God had prepared before the foundation of the world. Second, we learn here that *agape* is emotionally committed to the good of the other. God didn’t send Jesus to the cross because He intellectually decided that it was the right thing to do. Instead, that was the highest expression of God’s yearning for us, despite our sin. He longed for us to be with Him forever, and He was willing to give Jesus to do it. Third, *agape* is a self-sacrificing love if need be. Jesus was the most precious thing that God had, but He surrendered Him for us.

In the same way, friends, *agape* in us should be a purposeful commitment to seek the good of someone else, driven by our emotional attachment to them, an attachment that is so strong that it will lead us to suffer for them if the necessity arises. *Agape* isn’t some kind of hobby emotion. It ought to be the center of our lives.

John explores why this is when he presents our **CALL TO ACTION**. We see this in the next verse down, 1 John 4:11. This is a short passage, and at first, it seems that John is merely making an assertion. However, what he says here is actually logically demanded by the verse we studied a moment ago. Here’s what we saw God doing: He looked at each one of us, loved us so much, and valued us so highly that He chose to give His Son to redeem us. All of us recognize that the best way to determine the value of something is by learning what someone is willing to pay for it. If we want to find out what a house is worth, we hop on Zillow and see what it sold for six months ago. In the same way, friends, God set the value on every Christian with the blood of Jesus, which is infinitely precious. That means that every single baptized believer is of infinite worth. We have that on no lesser authority than God’s.

Because every Christian is worth so much, we should treat them accordingly. If Brian buys a brand-new Porsche 911 and lets me borrow it for a day, I’m not going to use my keys to carve my name on the side. I’m not going to drive it at 100 miles an hour down a gravel road filled with potholes. I’m going to treat it respectfully and with great care, because the car is worth more money than I make in a year. In the same way, friends, we ought to love our brethren with the same intensity with which God loves them, because that’s what they’re worth and how they deserve to be treated.

If indeed we do live up to God’s standards and love one another as He loved us, He promises us that this will have some extremely desirable **RESULTS**. Let’s read about them in 1 John 4:12. He begins by pointing out something important about God: that no one has ever seen Him. No human being has ever experienced the fullness of the presence of God. We can only know God indirectly, through His creation and His word. However, if we love one another as we ought, that picture changes, because through love, we can experience God. We still won’t be able to see His form, but we can come to know His essence. As we love, God abides in us. He begins to take more and more control of our lives until soon, we can experience the joy with which He loves others, and others can see Him working in us. Second, when we love, God’s love is perfected in us. God’s plan for mankind was always to teach us to love like He loves. That’s who He wants us to be. When we love one another, then, we bring His plan to fruition and glorify Him.

This emphasizes how central love is to Christianity in general. Conversely, **FAILURE TO LOVE** brings several significant consequences with it. Once again, we can turn to John for information about this. Let’s look to 1 John 4:7-8. Notice first of all how John ties *agape* exclusively to discipleship. People in the world, no matter how well intentioned, do not practice *agape*. They will never be as other-focused and self-sacrificing as a Christian ought to be, because they have neither God’s example nor the motivation of becoming like God. They lack the higher calling, so they lack the behavior.

However, John also tells us that Christians who lack the behavior don't understand the calling. When we grasp what Jesus has done for us and decide to become His disciples, that should be a life-changing event. Baptism isn't a fire-insurance policy. Baptism ought to be an expression of our commitment to live for others and for God, and not for self any longer. When our lives don't display the love for our brother that God and Jesus expressed so nobly, that calls into question whether we are actually Christians at all. We may have gotten wet, but we have not been born again.

Finally, *agape* for our brother must be **MORE THAN JUST TALK**. John brings this up as well, in 1 John 3:18. Where would we be if God had only loved us in word and in talk? What would our position be if God said, "Yeah, I really love all of those sinners down there, but you know, it would really put Jesus and me out if I sent Him to die for their sins. So . . . sorry, guys!" If God had loved us in word only, every one of us would be toast. Of course, that's not what God did. He backed up His big words with bigger deeds. We know that God loves us not by what He says, but by what He has done. In the same way, friends, if we truly have God's love in us, it's not going to reveal itself by fine-sounding words and good intentions. It's going to reveal itself by what we do. If we don't do, we don't actually love.

All of this gives us a great deal to chew on as we prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper. Because we are Christians, we simply cannot ignore the love and the sacrifice of Jesus. His one act of *agape* changed our future from eternal death to eternal life. His love made all the difference. Once we appreciate that, it's impossible for us to stay who we were. His sacrifice transforms and ennoble us so that we constantly look for ways to express our love for our brethren. Is that who we are? Is that what our lives are about? Let's consider this as we remember Him.

## Jesus and *Agape*

If indeed *agape* is so closely related to discipleship, then one of the best ways we have to learn what it requires is by turning to the words of the Master Himself. Let's see what Jesus had to say about *agape*. This morning, we're going to focus on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we can find in Luke 10:25-37.

Our appreciation for what's going on here has to begin with the **LEAD-IN** to the story. It begins with Jesus' encounter with a lawyer. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, "lawyer" doesn't mean "trial advocate". Instead, it refers to someone who was an expert in the Law of Moses. This lawyer, like many of the members of the religious elite did, decides that he is going to quiz Jesus on His understanding of the Law. He asks Him a question that appears in several other places in Scripture: which is the greatest commandment in the law? It probably functioned as a litmus test to determine whether someone was truly a religious expert or a member of the common herd, and the lawyer wants to see if Jesus knows the right answer. Jesus, of course, doesn't have any interest in playing this self-appointed religious authority's game, so He turns the question around on the lawyer. The lawyer meant to test Jesus as the one with superior knowledge, but Jesus ends up testing him. Probably without thinking, the lawyer responds with the correct answer: love God and love your neighbor. Jesus replies with the same condescending pat on the head that the lawyer meant to bestow. One can easily imagine the onlookers laughing at how neatly Jesus turned the tables on the pompous expert.

Of course, the lawyer doesn't appreciate being made to look like a fool. Why did he bother asking the question when he already knew the answer? Naturally, he hunts for some way to turn the tables back on Jesus, to show that he's the subtle Mosaic scholar and Jesus is the novice. He asks who his neighbor is. This too is a question that had a right answer. The traditions of the fathers taught that only ethnic Israelites were neighbors. Even if you happened to live next door to a Gentile, he wasn't your neighbor, and you had no obligation to love him. That's what the lawyer wants to hear. To him, the commandment to love was as much about who was excluded as who was included.

In response to this, Jesus relates **THE PARABLE** itself. He introduces a scenario that would have been all too familiar to the Jews of His day: a man traveling the notoriously dangerous road to Jericho, who ends up being waylaid, robbed of everything, and clobbered. We don't know whether this traveler was a Jew. All we know is that he was in need.

The first two travelers to encounter this needy man are a priest and a Levite. These two men would have been numbered among the lawyer's spiritual elite. They would have known that the second commandment was to love your neighbor. However, they certainly don't seem interested in putting *agape* into practice. Perhaps they were worried that the robbers were using the injured man as bait. Perhaps they didn't feel obliged to help because they weren't sure whether he was a Jew or not. Perhaps they simply didn't want to help. Regardless, they pass by on the other side.

The third traveler who comes along is a Samaritan. The prejudice between Jews and Samaritans 2000 years ago makes all of our racial hatreds look warm and fuzzy. Jews and Samaritans despised each other. However, like the Jews, the Samaritans honored the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, and this Samaritan clearly believed in his obligation to help. He supplied the aid that neither the priest nor the Levite did, everything that the victim needed.

From that point, Jesus makes His **APPLICATION**. He asks the lawyer, who almost certainly wasn't expecting this kind of response to his question, who in the story proved to be a neighbor. The lawyer, unwilling even to soil his lips with the word "Samaritan", says that the one who showed mercy was the neighbor. Jesus told him to do the same.

The commandment to love one's neighbor, then, doesn't apply to some rigid, pre-defined group of people. Instead, a neighbor is anyone whom we choose to help. By extension, we are commanded to love and help anyone who is

in need. This is important on several levels. It's noteworthy, first of all, that the only gospel writer who repeats this story is Luke, the author most concerned with Jesus' view of the Gentiles. Luke wants his audience, Jew and Gentile alike, to understand that Jesus thought that Gentiles were people too, worthy of whatever help they could give.

However, the story has every bit as much meaning for us today, and a lot of that meaning comes from a study of the behavior of the priest and the Levite. As we said earlier, we don't know why they refused to help. All we know is the what. However, the import of that decision is clear. Regardless of whether that bleeding man on the roadside was a Jew or not and so formally their neighbor, the way that they treated him proved conclusively that in reality, he wasn't.

In the same way, friends, there are groups of people to whom we are responsible. Everyone is our neighbor, so we have a responsibility to love everyone. Every baptized believer is our brother, and we have a special responsibility to love them as Christ has loved us. Those are the formal categories. However, what's important is not what the Bible calls my neighbor and my brother. What's important is whether in my actions I prove myself to be their neighbor and their brother. If I see a brother who needs my help and do nothing, I'm doing my best priest-and-Levite imitation. I'm passing by on the other side. The Bible claims I'm a brother to that Christian, but my actions are making a mockery of the Scripture. I'm denying what Christ says I need to be. Our brotherhood can only be shown by our works of love.

### ***Agape in Action***

So far, we've seen a lot of Bible passages that argue emphatically that our lives need to be filled with works of love directed toward our brethren. That's a fine-sounding principle, but what does it translate to in real life? To answer this, let's look at some more Scriptures that discuss *agape* in action. Logically, the first thing we must do is embrace Peter's admonition to **LOVE FERVENTLY**. Read with me from 1 Peter 4:8. As you all know, I'm a big word guy, and "fervent" is an interesting word. Originally, it was used to describe water that was at a full boil. The next time you're looking at a pot on the stove, and it's bubbling like crazy, think of the liquid inside as being fervent!

This is a marvelous metaphor for the love we're supposed to have for one another. Just like water at a full boil is obvious because it's bubbling up all the time, the love that we have for one another is supposed to be obvious because it's bubbling up all the time. Water that sends up a bubble once a month isn't at a fervent boil, and love that expresses itself only once a month isn't fervent love. Let's think about this particularly with respect toward our struggling brethren, the ones whose names I read last Sunday morning and am about to mention again. What have we shown those people? Does our love for them bubble up in their lives all the time, or do they see a love that is lukewarm with apathy and indifference? We may not be able to reach all of these troubled Christians, but if we aren't fervent, we won't reach any of them.

Second, our love should move us to **CONSIDER** one another. This point arises in Hebrews 10:24. Once again, there's a lot of meaning to unpack in this word. First, when we consider someone, that means that we devote a lot of time to thinking about them. Clearly, there are far too many brethren here who have found their way into spiritual trouble over the past couple of years. How much does that bother us? How much are they on our hearts? If we only think about them momentarily, maybe when we glance over and think to ourselves, "Hmm; I haven't seen So-and-So in quite some time", that's not considering them, and that low level of consideration calls into question our love for them.

Also, considering someone means that we think about them wisely, with a view to how we can intervene effectively in their lives. People are different, and as 1 Thessalonians 5 makes clear, there is no one-size-fits-all way to address the spiritual struggles of another. Some brethren need a helping hand; others need a kick in the pants. It depends on their personalities and our relationship with them. Remember, friends, the object is not to cross these weak disciples off our to-do list. The object is to lead them back to the Lord. We need to consider how to act before we act.

Regardless of what our view of a brother might be, though, we must always remember to **HAVE COMPASSION FOR** one another. Peter raises this point in 1 Peter 3:8. It's easy to make assumptions and get all righteous about Christians who appear as though they're going to fall away. We often believe that the reason why they aren't showing up at services anymore is because they developed an evil heart and decided to stop coming. In reality, the situation is almost always more complex than that. To them, their spiritual landscape looks very different than it does to us, and their choice to stop assembling with us looks reasonable and even justifiable. The things that look like excuses to us look like impassable barriers to them. On the one hand, it is important to remember that there is never a valid reason to stop serving God. God expects us to struggle through no matter what our earthly situation looks like. However, we still need to have sympathy for those who are struggling. We still need to have understanding for where they are in their spiritual plight. Getting up on our high horse and riding them down will get us nowhere. Instead, we need to see their world through their eyes and point out ways to repent and return that they can buy in to and accept.

In this process, it is equally important for us to **BEAR WITH** one another. Let's look at Paul's thoughts on this in Ephesians 4:1-2. Before I go on, let me take a little detour to mention that this applies to our relationships with all Christians, not just the spiritually weak. God expects us to be united with one another, and He expects us to work through whatever doctrinal and personal differences we may have. The only times when God does not require unity are

when our brother flatly refuses to obey a black-letter commandment, or when he flatly refuses to associate with us. Other than that, we are bound together in this congregation, and God expects us to stay in this congregation.

It's equally important, though, for us to remember to bear with in our dealings with weaker brethren. We must be patient with the spiritual struggles of others until our efforts have been rebuffed so repeatedly that it is evident that we have no hope of restoring them. We can't say to ourselves, "Well, I sent Thus-and-Such a Facebook message in 2011, and he never wrote me back, so I'm going to give up on him." That's not being patient. That's not bearing with. That's not expressing *agape*. We need to persevere in our work of reaching out until we have no reason for hope left.

Finally, we must **SERVE** one another. Read with me from Galatians 5:13. Service is one of the main themes of the Bible. As we learn from the example of Jesus when He washed the feet of His disciples, service means providing what is needed. It is clear from the spiritual decisions that they've been making that these brethren need our help. It is our responsibility to provide the help they need. If they need a brother to call them every Sunday morning to encourage them to go to services, we need to be willing to make the call. If they need a ride to the church building, we need to volunteer our time to do that. If they need an accountability partner to help them in their struggles with sin, we need to be willing to ask the unpleasant questions. If they need a friend, someone in the congregation who will spend time with them and care about them, we need to be willing to be that friend. All of those things are our responsibility as their brethren.

Sometimes, I'll hear Christians complaining about how Brother So-and-So is high-maintenance, that he can't seem to get his act together on his own, that he constantly needs somebody checking up on him. The implication of the statement is usually that if he doesn't care enough to become spiritually self-sufficient, then we should let him fall away. Brethren, that is a terribly ungodly attitude! Remember, Christ died for weak Christians too. He thought their souls were important enough to merit the shedding of His life's blood. If Christ was willing to give His life for them, who are we to begrudge our time? Even if we have to spend the rest of our lives helping someone, that's nothing next to eternity.