

Agape Love

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love...” Galatians 5:22

Opening question:

How would you define “love”? What does it mean?

What is Love?

Books, songs, movies, poetry, and art across the world reflect humanity's tireless search for the meaning of love. Many look through the lens of romantic love, trying to find meaning and purpose in another person's affection. Others point to friends or family, finding worth in those relationships.

Even though we search and strive to find and hold onto this concept of true love, we know deep down that there has to be more. Whether we know it from personal experience or not, there is an underlying understanding that finding worth and purpose in human love alone will eventually disappoint us. There must be something more constant and reliable than that.

In the English language, the word “love” is used in countless ways to mean so many different things. We use the same word to describe how we feel toward our family members and friends as we do our favorite TV show or restaurant. The meaning of the word has unfortunately been diluted and it has become difficult to define. How do we know what love truly is when there are so many different meanings?

The Four Loves

In ancient Greek, the language in which a large portion of the Bible was originally written, there are actually four different words that are used to describe love. They help us bring clarity and focus to our definition. C.S. Lewis explains each term in depth in his book *The Four Loves*. Here is a brief synopsis:

- Eros – passion, romance; intended to be experienced with one person (your spouse)
- Storge – affection between family members, such as a parent and a child
- Philia – deep friendship; brotherhood/sisterhood

These three, *eros*, *storge* and *philia*, are examples of earthly love that can be extraordinarily rewarding in the right contexts. They can be satisfying and enjoyable, bringing richness to our lives. They are truly gifts from the Lord! However, they cannot stand on their own. No person can find true fulfillment in one of these types of love. It is tempting to try, but these types of love are fleeting and insufficient without the fourth type of love, *agape*, which glues them together:

- Agape – unconquerable benevolence; sacrificial love that costs something

Agape is the perfect love of God, who spared no expense to deliver us from what we deserve – death – because of our rebellion and sin by dying for us. He came down to where we are and took our place so that as followers of Jesus, we can instead have hope and a future of eternal life in Him. That is nothing short of amazing!

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John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus is the ultimate example of love for us, whom he calls "friends"!

Qualities of Agape Love

We could fill an endless number of pages describing *agape* love. For the sake of brevity, here are a few key characteristics that set *agape* apart from other types of love:

- *Agape* love chooses **unselfishly** for the highest good of God, His kingdom, and His people. There is no hint of pride but a deep head-to-heart knowledge that "this is not about me."
- *Agape* love is **active**, not passive. In *agape* love, we tell someone "over my dead body will you live a selfish life." It never makes excuses for inaction, but rather acts with resolve and continually pushes forward to fight for others.
- *Agape* love is **enduring**. It doesn't rely on what another person does or how they may make you feel. It does not leave when the going gets tough, but it stays constant through difficulty and trial.

When we say we love something, often we mean that it gives us something in return. We may love cheesecake because it tastes amazing. We love a certain song because it sounds good. But God loves us not because we are worthy of that love, but because He loves us. He loves us because He loves us. He chooses to.

The Mark of a Christian

As followers of Jesus, we know and experience this deeper and truer love. We cling to the God who IS love. We have assurance that the Holy Spirit desires to impart the perfect love of God in us!

Throughout Scripture, we see that God is not impressed by what we do for Him if we do not also love others. That is the mark of a Christian to this world, to people who are striving after temporary things. True *agape* love is the way people know we belong to Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul says that not only what we do, but we *ourselves* are NOTHING without love.

In John 13, Jesus is explaining His impending death to His disciples (although they don't really understand it at the time). He tells them at the Last Supper, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Let's think about that seriously for a second. He asks them, and us, to love each other as He has loved us. What a high calling! He gave everything for us, and that is what He expects. How will we ever reach that?

Love Comes from the Spirit

Though we absolutely do not have the capacity within us to love ALL others as God loves us, we are free from having to spend our lives striving for it in our own power. The answer is not "try harder" or "do better." That's often what we think as we beat ourselves up for saying something hurtful, ignoring the needs of someone, or giving up when someone was hard to love.

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The answer is simply “draw closer.” We are connected to the true vine, Jesus (John 15), and He only asks us to abide in Him, promising to abide in us in return. He will give us His capacity to love as we seek Him. It isn't up to us! How refreshing it is to know that we can rely on God. We can count on Him to show us how to be people defined by *agape* love.

Drawing closer to Him does not simply mean sitting back and doing nothing. We must submit to and listen to God as He shows us how to love. John 15:9-10 says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.”

The way we learn how to love, showing others whose we are, is not a question of what we do but of the posture of our hearts. As we draw closer to God and obey His commands, we will allow the Spirit to produce in us *agape* love that is unselfish, active, and enduring.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways have you found yourself trying to find fulfillment in the three lesser loves?
2. How does it make you feel to realize that God loves you simply because he loves you?
3. Does it surprise you that the only way we learn how to *Agape* love others is through drawing closer to Jesus? Why or why not?
4. How will you start drawing closer to Jesus this week?

Tips for the Road

- Read John 15 and 1 John 4, focusing on the *agape* love of God.
- Spend time in prayer thanking Him for His love.
- Read C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*.
- Think of specific people in your life who you have trouble showing love toward. Ask God to show you how to change that.
- Think of one person you know who has a need, develop a plan to meet that need, and make it happen.