

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: October 14, 2018

## Learning To Love: Where Does Agapē Come From?

By Dan Trygg

“...the focal point of the instruction is love out from a clean heart, and a good conscience, and ‘unphony’ faith, ...concerning which some people, having lost this aim, have turned off toward empty talk...” I Timothy 1:5,6  
“Beloved, we might love one another because the love is out from God, and everyone loving has been begotten out from God and experientially knows God. The one not loving did not experientially know God, because God is love...” I John 4:7,8  
“We might love, because He first loved us.” I John 4:19

### Definitions of Agapē

This agapē love we have been discussing can be defined as the free choice to lift someone up in our own sight, and to choose to value them enough to *prefer them*, i.e., to give preferential consideration and treatment concerning their needs, their well-being, their level of comfort, and their personal tastes. **It is a consistent giving of your own self-will to attend to another’s well-being, as defined by God.** As we have discovered, this is not primarily a spontaneous emotion, it is a deliberate choice. At its root, agapē is a verb, ...an **action**, not a feeling. Since we, like our Maker, are emotional beings, it is not wholly devoid of emotion, however. There often *are* feelings of affection that we will associate with the object of our esteem, which are to be expected, as we choose to know and invest ourselves in that person. **The fountainhead of agapē, however, is in the will, not in the emotion. Therefore, agapē is not at all dependent upon what we get out of the relationship.** It can be free to give and serve, and remain steadfast, in spite of either a lack of response, or even a negative response, from the one being loved. **To prefer someone is to give them priority treatment**, ...to let them go first, ...to see to their needs and interests before those of others, or possibly even yourself. That's right, agapē is willing to make sacrifices, when it is appropriate and necessary to accomplish what is for the benefit of the beloved one. Such self-giving acts are **freely-bestowed, voluntary choices which flow out of the desire to lift up, prefer, and care for the other person.** They are not a duty, which can be expected or demanded, but are the free, decisive expressions of a heart that desires to help the other person. It is a self-aware, cost-counting love that unreservedly gives of itself, because the value of the outcome of the sacrifice is worth the cost, when compared with the potential for blessing the other person.

### Is it Possible to Learn to Do Agapē?

It is obvious from the teachings of the New Testament that **Jesus and His apostles fully expected that this kind of love would be something that we should be able to learn to do.** In fact, it was intended to become **characteristic of our lives.** Why is it, then, that it seems to be such a rare feature among God’s people? Why is it *not* the characteristic that non-Christians identify as the main feature of the Christian movement since its inception? I believe that it is because we have not made this our main focus. **We have not taken the time, nor given the attention, to learn the underlying dynamics of this as a skill to be learned.** In our characteristic Western outlook on reality, we have been linear in so much of our approach to theology and church life. We run the gamut of theology, surveying on a surface level the whole of Christian theology, but we never stop to focus on any one part to really grasp it and work it into our experience.

**Paul said that agapē love was the goal of what he taught. Jesus said it was to be the mark of His followers. Shouldn't we really zero in on this and get it down?** Doesn't it seem as though it really should be reachable? **Doesn't the testimony of the early church show us that it can be done?** I believe that this is meant to be basic Christian teaching and practice, but it has come to be obscured, minimized, unpracticed and unexpected. Instead of just moving on to explore new topics, let us hover around this one critical aspect of our birthright as Christians until we can begin to understand and incorporate it into our lives.

### Where Does Agapē Come From? -- A New Choice, or A New Capability?

If you will look closely at the translation of the verses from I John at the top of the page, you will notice some significant differences from what is in most common translations. There is some obscurity concerning the Greek word form in these verses. The same form of this particular verb is capable of being understood in two very different ways. It is either stating a fact (indicative mood – “we *do* love”), or it is describing a possibility, or potentiality (subjunctive mood – “we *might* love”). Some grammarians also see this latter mood of the verb as describing a possibility that we are invited or exhorted to do (hortatory subjunctive – “we *might* love [so let's go do it!]”). Unfortunately, it is difficult to express this nuance in English, so they have rendered it as “let us love”, which sounds very much like a command. (In fact, third

person imperative forms are typically translated with a “let it be” kind of formula [e.g., Acts 2:14,38], which makes the confusion even more extreme.) **The point is that there is no way that I Jn. 4:7,19 could be understood as *commands* to love. They are describing a *new possibility*, a *new capability*, which Christians have.** We might now agapē one another. John is saying that **it is something we can do now that we could not do previously.** Obviously, it does involve choice on our part, but without the new capability of the indwelling Spirit, we could never sustain such a choice to prefer others before ourselves.

The same message is strongly communicated by vs. 19. In Greek, it is “We might love, because He first loved us.” Often this is taught as an “ought” or a “should”. You know, “He loved us first, so we ought to love Him back.” That totally misses the point. John is actually saying, “Now we *can* love, because of the effect of His love.”

### **The Ingredients to Make Agapē Possible**

What explanation does he give? **What has happened that makes this difference possible?**

**(1.) God is the source of this kind of love.** John tells us that the agapē is out from God. Human beings cannot manufacture and sustain this kind of love on their own. God must enable this kind of fullness of heart from which to consistently give preferment to another. John goes on to make two other observations:

**(2.) Everyone doing this kind of love has been born out from God.** Only those who have been born from above are capable of this kind of unselfish love. Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “The thing having been begotten out from the flesh is flesh, and the thing having been begotten out from the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘It is necessary y’all to be begotten from above’”(Jn. 3:6). **Natural human life is incapable of producing true agapē love. Only life which has its origin from a *super-natural* source is able to love this way.** It was necessary for us to be radically changed inside for this kind of love to be made operational within us. There is something about us that is different than we were before. We have had to be made new in order for this new and different dynamic to be functioning within us. That is why Jesus made so much of the importance of agapē. It is one of the clearest evidences that what we are talking about is more than natural, human enthusiasm or philanthropy.

**(3.) Everyone doing this kind of love has an experiential knowledge of God.** This is highly significant, and is often overlooked. There are different Greek words for various kinds of knowledge. The word used here is one that describes **learning through personal involvement or experience.** Being a present tense, it also indicates that the one loving experiences God, in a present ongoing action, *as* he or she loves. Not only has this person been radically transformed, so that a new life is set into motion within him or her, but also, when the action of preferring another in the agapē fashion is being exercised, this person is experiencing God. This could be happening in two ways. **Either John is saying that the person gets to know God experientially, as he or she exercises the agapē, ...or he means that a relational knowledge of God is what prompts and sustains the love.** Either the believer becomes more acquainted with God's love as he or she chooses to live it out, ...or the experiential acquaintance with Him who *is* love is what prompts this person to love in the first place. It is impossible from this phrase to tell which is the case, and, of course, both dynamics could be happening at the same time.

In the next verse (4:8), John describes a **barrier to love**, “The one not loving did not experientially know God; for God is love.” What is interesting here is that the word translated “experientially know” is from the same verb as before, but it is in a form that means point-in-time action, usually action completed in the past. Again, there are two options. Either John is saying that in the moment that the person is not loving, he or she is not experiencing God, i.e., he or she is not abiding in Him. Or, he could be saying that the person did not experience this aspect of God in some way when they came to faith. It is interesting that John does *not* say that the one not loving has not been begotten from God. That would be too strong. It is possible to be born from above, to have the inner capacity for the dynamic of the Spirit to operate in one's life, and yet to still be “blocked”, or to be “impeded”, by either a lack of will on our part, or possibly even by a lack of realization or personal experience of God's love for us, and through us. This blockage could be removed by an inner experience of God's agapē for us (Eph. 3:14-19), ...or possibly by intellectually recognizing that this is Who God is, and what He desires, and, by means of little acts of obedience and stretching in this area, observing and experiencing the agapē of God operational within our own being as we serve, ...processing and internalizing as we do agapē (Phil. 1:9-11 -- The word “approve” in vs. 10 is dokimazō, “to test out by trial”). How we get in touch with God's love will vary from person to person. The point is, however, that **we must know the God of love in order to give the love of God.**

**(4.)** The Scriptures are very clear that agapē is the fruit of growth and maturity of our life in Christ (Gal. 5:22; II Pet. 1:5-7; Phil. 1:9,10; I Thess. 3:12,13; 4:9). **We already have the equipment we need to do this.** We have been made new, born from above, so that we can live out an unearthly, super-human dynamic. God has already made us adequate, capable, as servants of the New Covenant (II Cor. 3:5,6). We have been given the love dynamic of God, through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). **What remains is to realize and utilize, as we fraternize with God.**