

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Loving God, Others, and Self

by Dan Trygg

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.”

I John 4:20-5:1

“One of the scribes... asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The foremost is, “Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”’”

Mark 12:28-31

The kind of love that God is desiring to work into us, and through us to others, is His agapē love, the ability to choose to consistently seek the interests and needs of others, in light of God's best for them. This agapē is the very heart and character of God Himself, and has only become a possibility for us because:

(1.) **God has made us anew. He has *recreated* and *reconfigured* our humanity to be able to bear the good fruit of His indwelling life.** “We might love, because He first loved us” (I Jn. 4:19), in that apart from His sacrificial act of love we would still be a bad tree, capable of only poor fruit. Because of His powerful, far-reaching love, however, we have been changed, and new capabilities are put within us.

(2.) **His initiative of love, His grace while we were at our lowest, forever removes any sense of condition, any fear involving punishment, so that we can truly love out of a fullness of heart, ...not just mimic love outwardly from a sense of duty or compulsion.** God wants the real thing, so He has created a relationship of grace where love can grow freely.

(3.) **He Himself has become our partner in love, by coming to live within us to enable and sustain this “choosing to prefer others”.** There is no place that He would ask *us* to love, that *He* is not willing also to love, ...no person *we* are challenged to esteem and serve, who is not also on *His* heart to lift up. He will pour out Himself to serve through our own hands and feet, our own hearts and minds, because *He* is the indwelling, mobilizing force of agapē within us. The Holy Spirit has brought the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), and He is our Partner, the One “called alongside to help” (Jn. 14:16,17,26), who directs, guides and empowers us to do what love requires.

(4.) **He has set things up so that we are *fulfilled by giving in love*.** This does not mean that we will reap a multiplied harvest of those specific things we have sown (e.g., money), though sometimes even *that* does take place. Instead, as we give in preference to others, we find ourselves enriched, deepened and matured, spiritually (II Cor. 9:10,11). God has designed things so that our Spirit-led choices to give always produce something beneficial to us. As Jesus said, “It is *more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35).

Jesus had said that **the foremost commandment of all was to love (agapē) God with all that we have and are.** As we have seen in our study of the different Greek words for love, **this kind of love is *not* primarily an emotional feeling** or state of being. It is rooted in the will. **It is our “choosing to prefer” God above all others** in every part of our lives. His interests, His concerns, what things benefit Him, ...these all come to our attention as what is important when we choose to lift Him up above others and give ourselves to His service. When Jesus uttered the words, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”, He was not talking about an emotionally intense worship experience, or sentiment, or feelings of appreciation, warmth or admiration (though these may indeed follow). **By using a form of agapē in every reference involving our love for God (26 times), the New Testament clearly delineates that God desires a love that is a *voluntary choice of our will, a preferring of Him over all other interests, ...which ultimately translates to obedience.*** By contrast, of the twenty-five total times that the word phileō occurs in the New Testament, it is *never* used in relation to our love for God. It is used only five times in describing our relation to Jesus (Matt. 10:37 [twice]; Jn. 16:27; 21:17; I Cor. 16:22). In most of these incidents, the context makes clear that obedience and a “preferring over others” is implied, even though this more emotionally-based word is used. In John 15:14,15, Jesus uses the noun form of this word (translated “friend”) to describe our relationship to Him. On His side of the relationship, it means that He will share more with us; on our side, obedience is the clear response of friendship. This also fits the example of Abraham, who was called the friend of God (Jas. 2:23; cf. Isa. 41:8; II Chr. 20:7). His life depicts both a growing intimacy with God, along with a greater ability and call to obey.

What is the significance of this? As we had noted with the Biblical avoidance of the Greek word eros (descriptive of a passionate orgasmic religious experience, a word which had been the primary focus of worship in Greek culture), and now even further emphasized by the general avoidance of even phileō (emotional affinity, delight, enjoyment), **God is not looking for a “feel-good” kind of love from us.** He is not needy of, nor enamored with, our songs of praise, our gushing forth of emotional devotion, our religious talk and performance, our time spent in religious services or in personal religious discipline, *if* they are not consistent with obedient choices in the rest of our life (cf. Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:6-8; Jer. 7,8). **The love of God, at least from His perspective, is not about religious activities, or even primarily about positive feelings, ...it is about obedience,** ...about *choosing to prefer* God and His interests above all else.

The contrast between agapē and these other Greek word pictures is that **these other words describe the seeking and maintaining of a religious/emotional experience**, the pursuit of a feeling of warmth (phileō) or of orgasmic-intensity-and-numbing-release (eros). **Emotions are fleeting, changeable, and open to compartmentalization.** It is possible to have an emotional experience in a religious meeting, and live no differently than we did before, once we are away from that environment, because our emotions change dramatically with our perception of our surroundings. Different surroundings, different feelings. **Or, it is possible to get “medicated” by an “orgasmic religious experience”, and live life dependent on that “high”.** Characteristic of all addictions, however, such people become so focused on their own emotional/religious experience that they are out of touch with the world around them. They become insensitive to others. They easily dismiss the pain and concerns of others. They are in denial of the realities of life. They do not face up to obvious personal issues, inconsistencies in their relationships and irresponsible behavior in the rest of life. And, like other addictive cycles, their irresponsibilities complicate life more, making them feel (in little glimpses) *more* ashamed, *more* of a failure, *more* of a hypocrite, so they pursue more and greater religious “fixes”, going on retreats, pilgrimages, etc. (looking for a “higher high”), or becoming “meeting junkies” (more frequent “highs”).

By clearly avoiding these emotional word pictures for our relationship with God, the Bible presents love (agapē) of God as the commitment of the will to esteem and value Him regardless of how we may feel inside. Our love for God becomes a *choosing to do His will, a choosing to fulfill His purposes.* It is based upon the truth of who God is, and upon the reality of our commitment to prefer Him. Our emotions are *not* the focus, though they still must be addressed. **Love for God is not about feeling good, ...it is about doing good, as He leads us.**

Interestingly enough, **when we get that issue into perspective, then He focuses our attention on two other areas: loving others, and loving ourselves.** God wants a relationship with us, yes, but *He does not demand hours and hours of our personal attention.* **He wants us to become available channels of His love to others.** He puts us to work with others. How that plays out in the New Testament is that of the 143 times that agapaō (the verbal form of agapē) occurs, 49 times it is used in reference of our love to others, including our neighbors, enemies, wives, and other believers. That is almost twice as often as it is used of our love to God or Jesus (26x). In fact, the occasions it is used to admonish us to love one another in the Body occur with almost the same frequency as that of our love to God (24x). Or, to state the observations of the word usage of agapaō in a different way, of the 143 times that the verb occurs, about 48% of the time it describes *God’s love-in-action for us*, 18% of the time it describes our responsibility to esteem God above all else, and about 34% of the time it is to direct our choosing-to-prefer toward others, roughly half of that being a reminder to love one another in the Body. Having been impacted by God’s love for us, so that we would choose to respond to Him, we find **we are told to reach out to love others twice as often as we are told to love God.**

Why is that? It would seem natural and rational to value and esteem Someone who has shown the wondrous love, grace, mercy and wisdom that God has shown on our behalf. It is a whole different thing, however, to esteem and choose-to-prefer others who have done nothing like this on our behalf. (In fact, what they might do for us has nothing whatever to do with this kind of love.)

Where does this motivation-to-love (choosing to prefer) other people come from?

First, **if we are to esteem the Father, and to prefer Him, we will find ourselves caring about what He cares about.** His great love has been poured out for mankind, and He continues to try to woo them to Himself. We should not be surprised to find that His love for us, that prompted our love for Him, should now motivate us to reach out according to His interests and purposes to others who need Him as much as we do.

Secondly, **since He has designed us to be in His image, it is in fulfillment of our own created-purpose to be like Him in love,** to be ones who choose-to-esteem out of our own inner fullness.

Finally, it should also be observed that **if we love our Father, we will love ourselves, ...since we are His offspring.** This is assumed in the second commandment, and it is encouraged elsewhere (Eph. 5:28). **Self-love that is truly based on the agapē of God is His desire for us. It is not selfishness, but respect for self, as God’s child.**