

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Loving the “Different-other Near-one”

By Dan Trygg

“Owe to no one nothing, if not to agapē one another; for the one continually-loving the different-other person has fulfilled the Law. For the ‘you shall not commit adultery’, ‘you shall not murder’, ‘you shall not steal’, ‘you shall not covet’, and if there is any other-different commandment, in this thing it has been summed up, ‘you might agapē the near-one as yourself’. The agapē does not work injury to the near-one; therefore the agapē is the full measure of the Law.” Rom. 13:8-10

Agapē is the one obligation that will never be paid in full, an indebtedness that became ours as the realization of, and response to, the agapē of God for us, ...a love that *sought us*, and *bought us* for Himself (I Jn. 4:11; I Cor. 6:19,20). **As His offspring, it is incumbent upon us**, as the fulfillment and expression of the Divine life that is now alive within us, to grow up into His likeness, **to love what He loves, to love as He loves, to love in the manner and according to the extent of His own heart**. This is to be the preeminent mark of Jesus’ followers, a mark that too often remains obscured under layers of fleshly immaturity and misdirected attention. This is our primary calling. This is “the goal of the charge” Jesus gave (I Tim. 1:5). This is the focus of the new commandment which He prescribed, ...something made possible only by abiding in His life (Jn. 15:1-17).

It is important to see this passage in its larger context, for **it is very clearly a continuation of themes which were introduced in the previous chapter**. There is no break in the Greek between Romans 12:21 and 13:1. In fact, in verses 3 and 4, the same words for “evil” and “good” that had been used in 12:21 are each repeated three times, clearly hearkening back to the general statement, “Do not be overcome by the evil, rather overcome the evil by the good.” Likewise, 13:4 picks up the theme from 12:19. The rulers “are a servant of God to you, an avenger unto wrath to the one practicing evil” (habitually doing injury). This completes the thought from chapter 12 that we should try to be at peace with all people, not avenging ourselves, but rather “give place for the wrath”, a responsibility which God has said was His own. So, even though this section may be separated by a chapter division in our Bibles, and possibly set apart by a summary heading (neither of which were in the original letter which Paul wrote), in reality **this is actually not a separate subject, but a continuation of the argument about love which began in chapter 12**, verse 9, i.e., “let love be without phoniness”. Consequently, as Paul finishes his little aside about revenge against wrongdoers, he returns to his main theme, agapē. His interweaving of themes is masterful, as he switches back from our responsibility of supporting the government through taxes (13:6), to our responsibility to pay out to all whatever we might owe them, whether tribute to a dominating nation, taxes for our own government, fear (or respect), or honor (value and high esteem).

**The point of verse 7 is to “pay out”** (lit., give away from) **whatever it is we might owe**, or are indebted to give. Verse 8, then, uses the same word for debt or obligation, “Owe to no one nothing, if not the to agapē one another”. In other words, **pay off all obligations, as you can, but recognize that you will never pay off the obligation to love**. Keep paying out the interest, however. **Keep up to date on paying out the love-payments, as the opportunity and need arise**. (By the way, the implication of the passage is that we *will* have obligations to pay. This verse does *not* say, “It is wrong to be in debt.” What it says is “be a *payer* of what you owe”, whether taxes, respect, esteem, or what have you.) The opposite of what is presented would be a deadbeat, one who makes no effort to pay what is owed, who lets debts be unpaid and unaddressed, who shirks responsibility and seems unconcerned about the unjust abuse he afflicts upon others by misusing their trust and “sticking them” with the bill. **Just as Jesus has called us to be “fishers of men”, He calls us to be “payers of men”**. To *not* pay our bills is a reproach to our own character (we are *liars*, or at least *untrustworthy*), as well as to the Master we serve. On the other hand, to repent is to change our minds (and our behavior), to take responsibility for past debts and to become a payer of people to which we have obligations. This is a tangible and powerful testimony of the reality of a changed heart.

**To whom are we to “pay out” agapē?** Though not necessarily apparent in many English translations, **there are three distinct words used to identify the intended objects of our love**. Each word conveys a unique variation which is instructive. (1.) **The first of these is “one another”** in vs. 8. **This is someone who is part of our group, our community in Christ**. Our unretirable debt is “the to agapē one another”. The unique quality of this word is that it is a reciprocal pronoun, i.e., it describes action that goes both ways. The love-actions I do to you are reciprocated back to me. This is *not* a conditional thing, however. It is *not* saying that if you stop loving me, I will stop loving you. The thrust of the word describes an interactive relationship of loving acts given, received, and responded to in kind. I am only in control of *my* end of this equation. I can only do *my* part, deal with my investments of agapē, *but* inherent to the word picture itself is a community of interactive, responsive people esteeming one another by word and deed. The reciprocal

aspect implies an ongoing relationship, so that the act *could* be returned at an appropriate time. **(2.) The second word describes someone who is different than we are.** The person to whom *agapē* is to be given is simply translated “another”, ...or even as “neighbor”, in most translations. This translation misses entirely the *distinctiveness* of this word choice. There are two Greek words for “another”. One means “another-similar”, i.e., someone very much like the person to whom it is being compared. This word was used by Jesus to refer to the Holy Spirit in Jn. 14:16. He was to be “another Helper”, i.e., a Helper like Jesus Himself. The other Greek word for “another” means “**another-different**”. It refers to someone of a very different nature or quality, *...someone possibly outside of our group* or relationship system. *This* is the word Paul chose to use here. He wrote, “The one loving (esteeming, valuing, and giving preference to) someone *different than* him- or herself has fulfilled the Law.” It is relatively easy to value someone who is like you, ...one who thinks and acts like you do, and is compatible with you. It is a different story, however, to consistently value someone who sees reality *differently* than you do, who thinks and acts in ways that are strange or uncomfortable to you. To esteem *them*, to show them preference by accommodating *yourself to them*, calls for a deeper capacity to love. **(3.) The third word used to describe who we are indebted to love is translated as “neighbor”** in vs. 9. Though in English the word “neighbor” is a noun, the word in Greek is actually an adjective meaning “near”. Loving your neighbor is not necessarily about the person who lives next door, but about **the person “near at hand”**, someone who is in your day-to-day life. This is not limited to those who live next door, either. We may think of our “neighbor” as someone who is willing to help and will watch out for us. In fact, this positive understanding of the word is evident when a stranger does something unexpectedly nice for us, and we say, “That’s downright neighborly of you!” Of course, if we remember Jesus’ interchange with the scribe in Luke 10:25-37, the conclusion was that even a *stranger* can “come to be a *near-one*” by showing mercy to a person in need (vss. 36,37). *The most natural focus of the word, however, would imply those we spend the most time with*, such as family, friends, co-workers. If we can bring *agapē* into *these* relationships every day, in practical ways, our attitude will be quickly noticed and appreciated.

**“Agapē does no wrong to a neighbor;** therefore, love is the fulfillment of the Law.” Obviously, if love does not do any wrong or injury to the “near one”, then love would treat them in accordance with the teachings of the Law. Why is it that love does not injure the person being loved? **How does this work? Remember, agapē is the choice to value the other person.** How can you hurt someone you highly value? To injure them would mean that you do *not* value them as much as something else, ...probably your own agenda. Think about it. If you value someone else *as much as* yourself, then how could you impose *your* will, your preferences, your comfort upon them? Isn’t that what the choice-to-love is all about? ...to choose to *prefer* the other person more than selfish interest? ...to choose to value and honor *them*? **What does it mean to value?** Is it not to cherish, ...to consider as significant, important, and worthwhile? **Is it not to protect that person and their interests?** How can you do that, ...and selfishly choose to disregard their interests, their expressed opinion, their feelings, or their comfort in order to do what *you* would selfishly want to do? You can’t. The two mindsets are mutually incompatible. **So, genuine agapē will not work out what is injurious to the other person.** It cannot. At worst, it could only come to a draw, a stalemate where your interests and the other person’s interests are conflicting, but where you were unwilling to compromise your *agapē* for the other person in order to get what you selfishly want. **Ultimately, true agapē will prevail in a sound solution compatible with the heart of God.** In His view of things, there is room for both to have their needs met, and to flourish. There is no necessity to *take* from one person to give to another, ...although there may be times when love would motivate us to voluntarily give of ourselves to benefit the other person. In such giving, however, there is blessing and grace, so that though there may be outward loss or sacrifice, yet there is inward gain and fulfillment.

**Finally, the payment of love indicates that something is outwardly given.** Love is an *action*, not just a *sentiment*. To *pay love* to those “near us” implies that they will see some outward giving, some noticeable change. **There should be visible, tangible, noticeable acts, which are the fruit of genuine agapē.** It is too easy to tell ourselves that we “love” someone simply because we have a warm, kind, compassionate *feeling* toward them. God does not let us off the hook that easily. As mentioned before, **agapē is a verb, not a feeling.** It is something we *do*, not just *think about* or *experience*. **The analogy of a payment is very powerful** in this regard. Try telling the bank that you “felt” the payment being made on your loan, or that you had “good feelings” toward them. They are only interested in seeing your money passing from your possession to theirs. Even coming into their lobby to *show* them the check written out will not in any way impress them, if you do not actually *give* them the check, ...and if the check is not backed by sufficient funds to cover the payment. In the same way, feelings and intentions are not the kind of love which God is expecting from us. He is expecting nothing less than a motivation-to-*action*, with the emphasis on the *act*. **Making love-payments to others clearly communicates the “giving-away” nature of love. The focus is on the act, which keeps us from fooling ourselves with unfulfilled intentions or feelings.** *Pay* what you owe. “Love one another, as I have loved you.”