

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc. www.dtminc.org Today's Date: December 10, 2023

Learning To Love: Where Does Agapē Come From?

by Dan Trygg

“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...” 1 John 4:7,8

“And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has in us. God is love, and the one abiding in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” 1 John 4:16

“We might love, because He first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

“...this I pray, that your love might overflow yet more and more in true knowledge and all discernment, that you test-out-by-trial-to-discover the superior things, in order that you might be sincere and inoffensive unto the day of Christ, having been filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9-11

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. **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 was meant to be *basic Christian teaching and practice*, but it has been *minimized, unpracticed and unexpected*.** The Western church has focused more on *teaching information* than *implementation*.

If you look closely at the translation of the verses from 1 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 for “love” in these verses. The identical 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. **The point is that there is no way that 1 John 4:7,19 should 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.” John is actually saying, “Now we *can* love, because of the effect of His love working in us.”

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. Paul taught that ***the agapē of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who indwells us*** (Rom. 5:5). Human beings cannot manufacture and sustain this kind of love on their own. God must enable the necessary fullness of heart from which to consistently give preferment to another person. 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 reaching out to lift up another. 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’” (John 3:6,7). **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.** There is something about us that is different than we were before. We have had to be made new, and indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, in order for this new and different dynamic to be functioning within us.

(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*. The verb is also a present tense, indicating that the one loving *is* experientially-knowing God, *as* he or she loves. **This person not only *has been radically transformed* (in the past), so that a new life was set into motion within him or her, but also this person *is experiencing God* (in the present) when they are choosing to love.** 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” in expressing love.

This can be caused by either a *lack of will on our part*, ...or possibly 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 observing and experiencing the *agapē* of God operational within our own hearts *as we serve others* (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 for each of us. The point is that ***we must experientially-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; 2 Pet. 1:5-7; Phil. 1:9,10; 1 Thess. 3:12,13; 4:9; 1 Tim. 1:5). ***We already possess what 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 (2 Cor. 3:5,6). We have been given the love-dynamic of God, through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). John says we are to "trust (or 'believe') the agape-love God has *in us*" (1 Jn. 4:16). ***We are to believe what God says He has done. We are to TRUST THE LOVE that is in us. What remains is to put it into action! We actualize this love as we respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Love comes from obedience!***

(5.) ***Agapē is learned and matured by risk and experimentation.*** Both Romans 12:2 and Philippians 1:10 contain a Greek word which, when clearly understood, can significantly change our perception of how God has designed our spiritual growth to develop. The word in question, *dokimazō*, is translated as "prove" or "approve" in these verses. It literally means to "test-out-by-trial-to-discover". ***We are to engage in a process of experimentation in order to discern what works best.*** *Dokimazō* blows away the idea that the Christian life is a straight path that is well-marked, and easily followed. There is no simple list of behaviors that a new believer could easily follow in order to "walk rightly" in every circumstance. ***Our walk with God is to be personal, interactive, and experiential. He wants us to step out to experiment in order to learn, grow, and develop our relationship with Him, and discover what is most effective.*** Following are some implications of this Greek word:

(a.) ***God has not told us all we need to know.*** There are situations that we will encounter that the Scriptures have *not* given clear and specific guidance on. While the Bible does give us clear, non-negotiable boundaries concerning what is God's will in certain areas, there are circumstances where the desire or direction of God for us will *not* be obvious. God wants *us* to learn to be led by His Spirit through an experimental process (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18).

(b.) ***God expects us to make mistakes. This is a huge, extremely significant paradigm-shift for most of us to grasp. God is expecting mistakes,*** errors, lack of skill, poor choices, short-sightedness, stumblings, confusion, timidity, fear, lack of risk-taking, and sometimes over-zealousness that come from our inadequate and halting attempts to live out our faith. ***God is a Father who is raising children, ...and we are those children! He is not surprised by any of this, ...in fact, He has made plenty of room for it.*** He has given us parameters of wisdom and safety, which are spelled out in the Scriptures, and He surrounds us with other believers who can share their perspective and experiences with us to advise us. He Himself counsels us, to guide and encourage us along the way, by His Holy Spirit. ***He doesn't want us to make mistakes, get hurt, or to hurt others, ...but He knows we will.***

(c.) ***There are some things that can only be learned by doing, or by "putting to the test".*** (i.) ***Some truths will only be discovered by experimentation.*** For example, one of the usages of *dokimazō* involves discovering ***peoples' character*** by observing how they live and deal with situations (2 Cor. 8:22; 1 Tim. 3:10). Sometimes people talk a good line, but their actions eventually reveal that they are inconsistent. Other times certain people will stand out as trustworthy, because they have been steadfast under trial. They are "approved", in that they evidenced their trustworthiness by their actions. In another passage, ***strength and capability*** of teams of oxen could be discerned by putting them to a test (Lk. 14:19), much like we might take a car for a test drive today. In another example, ***God's will*** is sometimes to be discovered by a testing-out process (Rom. 12:2). (ii.) ***Developing skills requires experimentation.*** It involves *learning to do* something you have never done before. Learning *about* a skill is never adequate preparation for actually *doing it* in real life. There is no substitute for experience, ...no way to fully prepare for the sensations and dynamics of real-life action, ...no way that untrained, undisciplined muscles can accomplish what those strengthened and fine-tuned by years of practice can do. ***Moving from the theoretical to the experiential always involves an experiment.*** Putting our bodies, minds or self-awareness to the test, in either a simulation or a real-life situation, *is* a "trial episode", where we can discover what we actually can do. As we step out into a real-life situation, ***we rapidly evaluate, adjust and adapt*** our actions to attempt to accomplish whatever our goal is. We learn to try different approaches and tactics. (iii.) ***There is a progressive or cumulative dynamic to skill development. Something that initially requires great effort and concentration, can come to be "second nature", requiring virtually no conscious attention.*** This frees us up to concentrate on other aspects of the skill, or on other things of an entirely different part of life. (Remember how much concentration it took to learn to drive? Yet, after driving for a while, many of those skills that were once very difficult now have become second nature.) ***Living life is that way. Learning to love is that way, too. Learning to live and love in the body of Christ requires experimentation, discovery, adaptation, tolerance and grace.***