

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Increasing and Abounding in Agapē

by Dan Trygg

“...may the Lord increase and abound y'all in agapē-love for one another, and for all people, ...” I Thessalonians 3:12

“...making every effort, in your faith add virtue; and in the virtue, experiential knowledge; and in the experiential knowledge, self-control; and in the self-control, perseverance; and in the perseverance, good-devotedness; and in the good-devotedness, mutual affection; and in the mutual affection, agapē. For if these things are being with y'all, and are increasing, they render you neither ‘unemployed’ (not-working) nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” II Pet. 1:5-8

In I Thessalonians 3:12, Paul prays that God might increase and abound the Thessalonian Christians in agapē, both toward one another in Christ, and toward all people. Agapē, remember, describes not an emotional affinity or desire experienced in the presence of another. Rather, it describes a choice from the heart to value, esteem, honor, and benefit another person, with no strings attached. Instead of needing to get enjoyment from the other person, as is the case with regard to other loves, agapē does not give-in-order-to-get. Agapē can give to another out of the fullness of the giver's heart. It is a giving-because-I-have, not a giving-because-I-want. It is a choosing-to-value-and-estimate another, whether he or she responds to me in kind, or not. It is not about the person being loved. It is about the fullness of heart of the one who loves. The apostle John had said that only those who have been born from above and experientially-know God are truly capable of this kind of love, because agapē can only come from a heart filled with the agapē of God above. “We might love (agapē), because He first loved (agapē) us” (I Jn. 4:19).

If agapē comes from a heart that is full, then our ability to exercise this kind of love is limited by our own realized experience of God's love in our own hearts. This is precisely what the language John uses in I John 4 reflects. There is a growth process, a maturing of the realization of God's love for us in our own hearts, ...and a corresponding ability to choose to love others out of hearts having been made full and secure in His love. In fact, the Thessalonian Christians had already experienced some measure of that realization process. In 4:9 the apostle Paul affirms that they had indeed been “taught by God to love one another”. Interestingly, the Greek is more vivid about the source of this instruction. Literally it says, “you yourselves are God-taught ones unto the to-love one another”. The emphasis clearly is that they had been instructed by God in this. He was their teacher.

If these verses were isolated from their contexts, and from the rest of the NT, we would definitely get the impression that God was going to make this happen on His own. He would cause His love to rise up within our hearts automatically, and we would effortlessly become people who are loving one another and all people, as the passage describes. We could call this the “zap theory”: God will just zap us with a spiritual experience of His love, and from then on, loving would come as natural as swimming is to a duck. The truth is, however, that this is a misperception of reality, a partial understanding. As with so many aspects of our spiritual walk, God has established things so that there must be a joint effort, a partnership of the Divine and the human, in order to see the fruit of agapē worked out in our lives. In fact, part of the success of the Thessalonian Christians in this regard was that they had put their faith and love into action, “...for indeed you do practice it towards all who are in Macedonia” (4:10). The truth is that even ducks need to learn how to swim. They are taught by example, as well as by learning-by-doing. Even though the potential is within them the entire time, it is a skill that is developed and perfected over time. In the same way, the “Divine side” of the equation in our lives is that He has sent His Son to not only rescue us from the penalties and effects of sin, but also to make possible a new, radically different inner dynamic, ...the new covenant, Spirit-prompted life..., which can enable us to live very differently than we ever did before. The potential is there, but the experience and development of that inner life takes time and effort from us, as well as the ongoing instruction and encouragement of both our Heavenly Father and our other members in the Body of Christ.

The apostle Peter gives expression to the human side of this issue in a very practical way. In II Peter 1:3,4 he declares to us the great potential and calling that has been made available to us. Nothing less than “all things of His Divine power that pertain to life and godliness have been given to us”. The Greek communicates the idea that God gave them to us and they are still available to us for the taking. The next phrase begins to open up the human side of the equation. These things God has offered to us come “through the true knowledge (experiential, flash-of-insight, discovery kind of knowledge) of the One having called us to (or, ‘by’) His own glory and virtue.” In other words, there is a process of discovery and realization which must happen in order for us to be able to understand and utilize what God has made available to us.

This brings up two factors that are related to our humanness: time and effort. Obviously, if it is a discovery process, there is a time factor involved. It takes time to sift through what God wants to show us. To some degree that

is beyond our control. We are finite, time-bound beings, and can only take in so much at any given moment. The **effort factor** can affect this time/discovery dimension. If we put no effort in at all, we will learn only what comes to us “accidentally” through life experiences. Unfortunately, we will certainly run out of our earthly existence long before we would get very far in the discovery/maturation process, if we were to approach it in this fashion. On the other hand, **if we apply ourselves diligently to the processes of discovery and implementation, we will most likely come to perceive and master a great deal more.** Our experiences in every other aspect of life clearly teaches us this lesson. Why would it not be so for our spiritual development?

Peter moves on to speak specifically of God’s promises “which have been given in order that through these things (promises and everything else) you might come to be sharers of the Divine nature, fleeing away from the corruption (rotteness) in the world system [caused by] lust”. Here, then, is another limiting principle: the **obedience factor**. Being a partaker of God’s own nature can only happen if we turn away from the lust of this present world system. “God is light. In Him is no darkness at all. If ever we might say that we have fellowship (lit., a sharing) with Him, and we walk about in the darkness, we are phony (even deceiving ourselves?) and we do not do what is truth.” These words from I John 1:5,6 declare the same message as Peter: You can’t have it both ways. Either choose God and the things of God; or choose the world system, and the things of the world system. The two are incompatible. God promises life, and inner fulfillment. He says that the world system produces death and decay, in spite of its *claims* to have life and fulfillment. Who will you choose to believe? If you want more of God, you must choose to put aside those practices, attitudes and opinions that are in conflict with His ways.

Because of these factors, Peter says that we must “making every effort (exerting all zeal or earnestly applying yourselves) provide with our faith” certain things. Again, the language is very strong on human application. It will *not* happen by itself. God has not set things up that way. He set things up so that we would participate in the process, and by the struggle itself, be matured. Also, **our bare, minimal faith is not enough. If we want what God has for us, we must go after it. We must exert ourselves to get it.**

Furthermore, God gives us the responsibility for our own spiritual development. **We are to add to the basic foundation of our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord some other key ingredients:**

(1.) **Virtue** - This word generally refers to a work of excellence. It can mean acts of moral excellence (Phil. 4:8), or possibly an excellent attitude, or it can refer to the manifestation of God’s power (II Pet. 2:9). Just stop and think through these possibilities and what they would look like.

(2.) To this, we are to add **experiential knowledge**. This is not theological knowledge, this is knowledge gained through doing or experiencing something.

(3.) Next, along with this experiential knowledge, we must add **self-control**, or self-regulating power within, self-discipline. In other words, we must stand against the natural tendency. We must resist following some kind of selfish path that we would otherwise go down.

(4.) To this, then, is added **perseverance**. The Greek actually means to “remain under”, i.e., to remain consistent under the pressure or temptation.

(5.) To this developing character, we are to add **reverence**, or “good devotedness”. The heart of the word is not about godly behavior, it is about a “God orientation”.

(6.) To this God-orientation we add **mutual affection**, or brotherly love. This is the kind of enjoyment or delight in one another that comes from mutual enjoyment and interchange that is beneficial to both. It is obvious that from the God-relationship comes the relationship with others. The mutual affection and affirmation strengthen the process of self-fulfillment that is ultimately rooted in God, by bringing the voices and confirmation of others to help us, as well as fortify ourselves as we learn to serve others.

(7.) **Agapē** is the final and pinnacle focus of this entire process. Agapē is a choice, not an emotion. As such, it is a decision we make. It comes out of the fullness of our hearts, but it still is at the discretion of our will. We must choose to give it out from the relationship rooted in God, ...in the face of inconvenience, in the hardship of trial, ...or it is not the real thing. All the above-mentioned steps described are building blocks in the process of learning to love. Love is the focus, the end point.

These qualities will not leave us “unemployed” by God. In other words, He will use us. If these qualities are ours, God will not leave us idle. He will put us to work, doing His will. **If we have these qualities, we will be effective.** Because we have been equipped and readied for the work, which God will bring into our lives (Eph. 2:10), we can begin to bear fruit. This will bring glory to God, because it will be clearly evident that the work is not from human effort alone. The marks of God’s work in our lives will be evident not only in our character, which has been built in partnership with Him, but also by virtue of the operation of the Spirit directly reaching through our lives into the lives of those around us.