

I had two messages to prepare for the Christian Heritage Conference this past week, and I planned to use one of those messages this morning. But as I worked on them it was clear they were workshop messages that don't work well as sermons. I didn't have the time to prepare a completely new sermon this week, so I took material from two sermons from about ten years ago and polished it and put it together for this morning's sermon. I hope it blesses you as much as it blessed me working on it.

Let's pray.

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"What Are the Characteristics of Agape Love?"*

Unfortunately, our world has ruined a biblical understanding of love. We are taught that love is something over which we have no control. This is why we talk about "falling in love." It's as though people are walking along, they trip, and the next thing they know, they've developed feelings for someone.

According to this understanding of love, a man could tell his wife...

"I didn't mean to develop feelings for this coworker. We just kept running into each other in the hallway and the break room, and before I knew it, I fell in love with her."

This idea is so ingrained in us we came up with the idea that a little baby named Cupid flies around, shoots people with arrows, and they fall in love.

This unbiblical idea also allows people to fall out of love. A man could tell his wife...

"I'm sorry, but I no longer love you. I don't know how or when it happened, but I just fell out of love with you."

But Scripture prevents both scenarios by doing two things...

First, Scripture presents love as a choice over which we have complete control. We choose whether we do or don't love. This is why God can command us to love our enemies.

Second, Scripture presents love as actions...versus feelings. This is why 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, is filled with verbs, or action words, versus adjectives, or describing words.

In Scripture, the primary word for love is agape. So, let's talk about it, so we have a biblical understanding of love. Agape has two important characteristics, and I would like to describe both...and this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: Agape is unconditional.

This is the first important characteristic of agape: it is unconditional.

This means agape is not affected by a person's actions, looks, or possessions. Nothing can be done to increase or decrease agape. It can only be given. Agape does not demand reciprocation and it is independent of how it is treated in return. Agape loves even when rejected, mistreated, or scorned. That is what makes this form of love so unique and distinguishable.

Here's one well-known verse where the word agape occurs twice...

Ephesians 5:25 husbands, love (agape) your wives, as Christ loved (agape) the church and gave himself up for her.

If a husband asked me about this verse and said, "How far should I be willing to go to love my wife?"

I would point him to an Old Testament account that provides a beautiful and moving picture of agape's unconditional nature. As I briefly explain this account we will also be given an understanding of God's love for Israel.

Here's the context...

God told the prophet Hosea to marry a woman, Gomer, as an object lesson about God's relationship with Israel

Hosea 1:2 The Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."

We don't know whether Gomer was already a harlot when Hosea married her or she became one later, but at some point, Gomer left Hosea—either to resume her career as a harlot or to pursue adulterous relationships.

Eventually she found herself destitute and she either sold herself into slavery or someone else sold her into slavery.

We know this was a sexual slavery, like human trafficking today, because God later commanded Hosea...

Hosea 3:1 The Lord said to [Hosea], "Go again, love a woman who IS LOVED BY ANOTHER MAN AND IS AN ADULTERESS, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love [sacrificing to other gods]."

Notice the present—versus past—tense of the verse. Hosea was to love Gomer even while she was in an adulterous relationship.

In last Sunday's sermon I talked about redemption. I said it means buyback.

Hosea had to redeem, or buyback his own wife...from her relationships with other men. Imagine that.

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The verse also says **love a woman**.

Hosea had to buy her back and then love her. He couldn't buy her back and then ignore her or mistreat her because of what she had done as tempting as that might be.

This would have required an unimaginable amount of forgiveness and grace, but Hosea did it. This is unconditional love. This is agape.

If a husband ever asks you how far he should go for his wife, point him to this account.

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This account primarily serves as a picture of God's love for Israel. Listen to this...

Hosea 3:5 Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God.

Hosea 14:4 I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.

This presents Israel as a repentant bride and God as a husband who liberally loves and forgives.

Notice that it was Hosea's love that one back Gomer, which pictures God's love winning back Israel.

It is a wonderful example of what can take place in even the most broken marriages when a husband will agape his wife. Let me give you an example of such a situation.

Katie and I have some dear friends, Dave and Naida Gomes, who were mentors to us in California. Some of you might remember them from when they visited and shared during Sunday school. They gave me permission before to share this testimony, but I followed up just this past week to make sure we still had permission, and Naida said...

“We don’t mind if our names are used. It is God’s story of rescuing to sinners and He receives all the glory. I once was a woman running to sin and now a woman running from sin. May our story of being written into His redemptive story be used in whatever way our good God purposes.”

So here’s their Hosea and Gomer story...

Naida was unfaithful to Dave early in their marriage before they were Christians. Naida was running around on Dave, even living with other men for stretches of time. Days went by when Dave didn’t know where Naida was or how she was doing.

As Dave and Naida share their testimony, there is one point at which Naida always becomes emotional. She shares how she had been living with another man and came home hoping to have pushed Dave far enough that he would divorce her.

Naida didn’t know that while she was gone, Dave had become a Christian. Though Dave recognized the sin in Naida’s life, he also recognized the sin in his own life. He knew he needed a Savior just as much as Naida. As a result, he was willing to forgive her. When Naida walked in, Dave was sitting in a chair reading his Bible. Looking up at her, he said, *“I’m so glad you’re home, because I was so worried about you.”*

Just as Hosea’s unconditional love for Gomer finally won her back, Dave’s unconditional love for Naida won her back. She became a Christian and is one of the godliest women we know. Over the decades of their marriage, Dave and Naida have faithfully served Christ and furthered His kingdom. God used Dave’s agape to redeem Naida and make her an instrument for His glory.

The second important characteristic of agape...and this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson Two: Agape is sacrificial.

Agape is an action. It’s about what we are willing to do. First Corinthians 13 is the love chapter, and listen to these verses...

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

How many words here describe feelings and emotions?

None!

How many words are verbs or action words describing what love is willing to do?

All of them. Love is what love does.

Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan, which perfectly illustrates the active and sacrificial nature of agape. If Hosea and Gomer illustrate the unconditional nature of agape, this parable illustrates the sacrificial nature of agape.

Because we were probably all familiar with this, I’m simply going to recount what happens.

A lawyer tested Jesus saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus responded, “What is written in the law?”

The lawyer loosely quoted two well-known Old Testament passages...

Deuteronomy 6:5 You shall love [agape] the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind and Leviticus 19:18 love [agape] your neighbor as yourself”

Jesus said, “You have answered rightly. Do this and you will live.”

The lawyer understood that to receive eternal life, he needed to have agape for God and his neighbors, and if he could do this perfectly, he could receive eternal life. But nobody can exercise agape perfectly. The lawyer probably knew this, which probably explains why he tried to justify himself by asking another question: “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus told the familiar parable in response...

A Jewish man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by thieves who robbed him of his clothes and left him half-dead. A Jewish priest and Levite passed by but did not help. Then a Samaritan, whom the Jews hated:

- tended to the man’s wounds
- set the man on his donkey
- took him to a nearby inn,
- left funds to help provide for the man’s care

Then Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

Jesus’s question could just as easily be worded as, “Which of these three do you think showed agape?”

So, let’s consider the three ways the Samaritan’s actions depict agape...

First, the Samaritan’s love was not conditional on anything the wounded man had done for him. The Samaritan and the wounded Jew were strangers, so why did the Samaritan help him?

- Was it all the good times they had shared together?
- All the wonderful things the injured man had done in the past for the Samaritan?
- Some expectation the man would pay back the Samaritan in the future?

No. The wounded Jew had done nothing for the Samaritan, and the Samaritan did not expect anything in return. That is the unconditional nature of agape.

Second, the Samaritan’s agape is shown in that he loved a man who despised him. The Jews hated the Samaritans, but the Samaritan was willing to help the Jew anyway. Agape loves even when it is rejected.

Third, the Samaritan’s actions reveal the sacrificial nature of agape:

- He bandaged the man’s wounds. There were no first-aid kits in those days, so he must have made the bandages from his clothes.
- He used oil and wine to clean the wounds. He put the man on his animal and took him to an inn, where he paid the man’s bill and promised to pay even more in the future if needed.

All this took time, effort, and money. Agape is demonstrated not by words but by actions and sacrifice.

Sometimes the best way to understand something is to contrast it with something else. I think the only way we can truly appreciate agape is to have some understanding of the secondary love discussed in Scripture, which is *phileo*...and this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: Agape is superior to *phileo*.

Most commonly, *phileo* is the kindness between friends. When people consider themselves close friends, *phileo* is the affection they have for each other.

Phileo forms part of the words:

- philosophy, an affection for wisdom
- philanthropy, an affection for fellow man.
- The name for the church at Philadelphia, which is mentioned in **Revelation 3:7-13**, means “the church of brotherly love.”

When Jesus wept at Lazarus’s gravesite in **John 11:36**, the eyewitnesses said, “**See how He loved [phileo] him!**” Jesus had strong affection or brotherly love for Lazarus.

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Phileo does not always have a positive connotation...

Matthew 6:5 [Jesus said, “The religious leaders] love [phileo] to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets.”

The religious leaders had a strong affection for men’s adoration.

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Interestingly, even though husbands are commanded to have agape for their wives, wives are commanded to have *phileo* for their husbands...

Titus 2:3-4 older women...train the young women to love their husbands.

The Greek word for “**love their husbands**” is *philandros*, a combination of *phileo* and *aner* (the Greek word translated “husband”).

Why the difference? Is it that husbands do not want or need agape?

The reason for the difference is that the needs of husbands and wives are different.

Most men—myself included—would say it can be very discouraging and trying at times being a husband, father, provider, spiritual leader, and all the other roles and responsibilities that fall on our shoulders:

- What could be more encouraging for a husband than a wife who is also a best friend, regularly loving him with *phileo*?
- Conversely, what could be more discouraging for a husband than a wife who acts more like a mother reprimanding him?

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Agape is unconditional, but *phileo* is conditional. *Phileo* can come and go and increase and decrease. Because agape is unconditional, it cannot be earned or merited, but people can successfully create *phileo* for someone else by being a better friend.

Two friends might have *phileo* for each other because of qualities they share or circumstances that bring them together, but if those qualities or circumstances change, their *phileo* for each other might also change.

Now that we understand *phileo*, let me show you that it is superior to *agape*. Please turn to **John 21**.

A conversation between Jesus and Peter reveals *agape*'s superior nature. The background to this encounter was Peter's earlier pledge to lay down his life for Jesus. Even when Jesus warned Peter that he would deny Jesus three times, Peter vowed his unswerving love. In fact, he boasted...

Matthew 26:33 Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."

But sure enough, when Jesus was arrested, Peter ran to save his life and denied—three times—ever knowing Jesus. During Peter's third denial, **Luke 22:59-62** says Peter made eye contact with Jesus. We are not told what Peter saw during that brief look from Jesus, but Peter became convicted to the point of stumbling away and weeping bitterly. I doubt there was a lower point in Peter's life.

By **John 21**, Peter has learned of Jesus's resurrection and at least twice he has been with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them¹. But the shame and anguish of his betrayal must have remained a heavy burden as we will see.

The disciples were out fishing, and Jesus called to them from the shore. Peter responded by immediately diving into the water and swimming to the shore. Then while the disciples were eating with Jesus, we see Peter's restoration. Look at **verse 15**...

John 21:15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [agape] Me more than these?"
[Peter] said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You."
[Jesus] said to him, "Feed My lambs."

In asking if Peter loves Him more **than these**:

- Jesus could be referencing the fish, which would be like asking, "*Do you love Me more than fishing?*"
- Or He might have the other disciples in mind, in which case Jesus would be asking, "*Do you love Me more than you love these other disciples?*"

But based on Peter's earlier prideful declaration that he loved Jesus more than anyone else, Jesus was probably asking Peter if he still believed that to be true: "*Do you love Me more than these other disciples love Me?*"

Regardless of intent, Jesus was asking about Peter's love for Him, and He used the word *agape*.

Peter was humbled by His failure, so He responded to Jesus with the word *phileo* instead of *agape*. He knew that his earlier actions prevented him from being able to claim the superior form of love Jesus asked about.

John 21:16 [Jesus] said to [Peter] again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [agape] Me?"
[Peter] said to [Jesus], "Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You."
[Jesus] said to [Peter], "Tend My sheep."

As though to make His question easier, this time Jesus dropped the phrase **more than these**. But He still used the word *agape*, and again Peter responded with the word *phileo*.

John 21:17 [Jesus] said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [phileo] Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love [phileo] Me?"
And [Peter] said to [Jesus], "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love [phileo] You."
Jesus said to [Peter], "Feed My sheep."

This time Jesus also used the word *phileo*. He had stopped asking if Peter had *agape* for Him. This **grieved Peter**.

The whole conversation must have been painful to him...

First, Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” The three questions would remind Peter of his three denials. Being asked the same question three times would make Peter think Jesus did not believe his professions of love.

Second, Jesus started using the word *phileo* as though calling into question even this inferior love Peter professed for Christ. The possibility that Peter did not even possess *phileo* for Jesus grieved him.

Third, throughout the conversation, Jesus didn’t use the new name He had given Peter.ⁱⁱ Peter means “rock,” signifying strength. Jesus reverted to calling Peter by his original name, Simon, which implied that Jesus was not seeing Peter any longer as a rock. Considering Peter’s arrogance when he boasted of his love for Jesus, he undoubtedly needed this reminder of his own weakness and humanity so as not to place so much trust in himself again.

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Whenever I read this account, it reminds me to carefully evaluate my own love for Christ, and I hope it does the same for all of you.

I picture Jesus asking, “*Scott, do you love Me?*”

When Jesus looks at my life, what kind of love does He see me have for Him? Is it simply an affectionate *phileo*, or unconditional and sacrificial *agape*?

Would Jesus have to ask me three times whether I love Him, and humble me as He did Peter?

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Up to this point we have discussed the positive elements of *agape*, but for a full understanding, we should understand it is used one other way in Scripture...and this brings us to Lesson Four...

Lesson Four: Agape is man’s love for sin.

John 3:19 This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved (agape) the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

Considering what we have learned so far, this usage for *agape* should make perfect sense...

Agape loves even when the love is not reciprocated. Man loves sin even though sin does not love in return. In fact, sin does the opposite...

Romans 6:23 The wages of sin is death.

Sin’s response to those who love it is death.

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Agape loves unconditionally. It is completely independent of how the object of the love acts toward or treats the one loving it. Fittingly, man continues to love sin regardless of the guilt, punishment, suffering, or discipline we experience as a consequence of engaging in it.

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Agape loves sacrificially. Think of everything people are willing to sacrifice up for sin: health, dignity, jobs, finances, children, parents, marriages, friendships, churches, and even relationships with the Lord. The truth is that there is little man will not sacrifice for sin.

1 John 2:15 Do not love (agape) the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves (agape) the world, the love (agape) of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

When we give in to these lusts, we demonstrate a greater love for sin than for God. The motivation behind sin is always selfish, whereas the motivation behind loving God or our neighbor is always the best interests of our neighbor.

Sinning is an act of the will, but so is *agape* love. We choose to *agape* love our neighbor when we choose not to *agape* love sin.

Lesson Five: Agape is God's love for man.

God is the embodiment of *agape*...

1 John 4:8 and 16 God is love [agape].

Just three verses before **John 3:19**, which we just read about man's love for sin, is the most famous verse in the Bible...

John 3:16 for God so loved [agape] the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Think of the ways this verse could be worded...

God so loved the world that:

- He created a beautiful planet for us to enjoy.
- He gave us the wonderful gift of marriage.
- He blesses us with children.
- He established the church so His people could be part of a family.

All these are true statements, but they are not examples of God's *agape* because they lack one of *agape*'s required characteristics: sacrifice.

The sacrificial nature of God's *agape* is needed, and it is made evident in giving His Son.

1 John 4:10 This is love, not that we loved [agape] God, but that He loved [agape] us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

This communicates the sacrificial nature of God's *agape* in that He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Romans 5:8 God demonstrates His own love [agape] toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This communicates the unconditional nature of God's *agape* in that He loved us even when we were in rebellion against Him.

Just as God sent Hosea back to Gomer to love her when she was committing physical adultery, so God loved us even when we were committing spiritual adultery.

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I will close with this...

I never understood the extent of God's unconditional, sacrificial *agape* until I became a father.

Children can be cruel. When they rebel against their parents, how do most parents respond? Do they stop loving their children?

No.

I remember a conversation with Rhea when she was seven. She asked me if I would still love her even if she did bad things. Each time she asked a question, she started out, *“Would you still love me if I...?”*

Finally, I told her, *“Yes, I love you so much that there is nothing you could ever do that would make me love you any less. Truthfully, I love you so much I don’t know how I could even love you more.”*

When I said this to Rhea, I meant it, and I know other parents would say the same to their children.

That is agape and the depth of God’s agape becomes more vivid to us when we contrast our agape with His...

If I, a fallen, sinful, selfish man with imperfect love, can demonstrate this kind of love toward my children, how much greater must God’s agape be for us, considering He is love?

I love Rhea because she is my daughter, but the far greater unconditional and sacrificial nature of God’s agape was demonstrated when He was willing to sacrifice His Son for unloving sinners like us who lived in active rebellion against Him, yet He adopted us so we could be His sons and daughters. That is agape, and that is the great love God has for us, and He wants us to have for others.

If you have any questions about anything I shared this morning, or I can pray for you in any way, I will be up front after service, and I’d consider it a privilege to speak to you.

Let’s pray.

ⁱ John 20:19-31

ⁱⁱ Matthew 16:18

ⁱⁱⁱ When we give in to these lusts, we choose sin over our spouses. What does this look like? Let’s consider some examples.

A husband gives in to

- the lust of the flesh when he gets drunk
- the lust of the eyes when he looks at pornography
- the pride of life when he does his work with the motive of receiving praise

A wife gives in to

- the lust of the flesh when she makes purchases behind her husband’s back
- the lust of the eyes when she covets her friend’s home
- the pride of life when she embraces the flirtations of a man who is not her husband