



HELPS Devotional Articles

An excerpt from *The Discovery Bible* by HELPS Ministries.

Toward a definition of biblical love

Love (26/*agapē*) may be the most challenging term in the entire Bible to *define* – which is not surprising since "God is love (26/*agapē*)!" See 1 Jn 4:8,16. (However, love is not God!)

Perhaps the single *most helpful* passage to furnish a working biblical definition of love is 1 Jn 4:16,17. It shows love is not simply doing for others what *they think* we should for them . . . or ourselves!

1 Jn 4:16,17: ¹⁶"Indeed we have known (Gk perfect tense) and have believed (Gk perfect tense) *the* love which the God has *within* (1722/*en*) us. *God is love* (26/*agapē*), and the one *abiding in the love* (26/*agapē*) *abides in* (1722/*en*) *the* God, and *the* God *abides in* (1722/*en*) *him*. ¹⁷In this, the love (26/*agapē*) *has been perfected* (developed, 5048/*teleioō*, Gk perfect tense) *with* (3326/*meta*) *us*, so that we may continuously have confidence in the day of judgment, *because just as* (2531/*kathōs*) *He is, also are we in this world*."

Observations

1. Developed love (26/*agapē*) relates to *the risen Christ living His life through ours* (this also defines "Christian") – i.e. just "as He is, also are we in *this* world" (1 Jn 4:17). This is the core-idea of 26/*agapē* ("what God prefers") – which must be kept in mind when *asking for love from people* and how people want us to *give* it!

Reflection: 26/agapē ("love") has a "technical" meaning in the Bible. *Biblical* love is *always* and *only* from God, so *people can never define love* for themselves – saying, "If you love me, you *will* do . . .". Biblical love lives *out* the personal revelation of God's will He imparts through faith.

Faith (4102/*pistis*, "the Lord's inworked *persuasion*") and *love* (26/*agapē*, "God's preference") are directly connected in the NT (see Eph 3:17,18; 1 Thes 1:3, 3:6, 5:8). Predictably, 26 (*agapē*) and 2307/*thelēma* ("God's preferred-will") are also directly connected – see: Ro 15:30-32; Eph 2:3,4.

2. Nigel Turner, *Agapē* (*agapaō*) chooses "its object *deliberately*. *Agapē* will come nearer to 'esteem' than 'love.' . . . *agapē* is a calculated disposition [guided by God]

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of regard and pious inclination" (*Christian Words*, 263)

Even in contexts dealing with the *unsaved*, *agapē* is *still value-based*. "Do not love (*agapaō*) the world or the things of the world . . ." (1 Jn 2:15). Yet "personal *values*" never become the "measuring stick" of genuine love!

Reflection: Love (26/*agapē*) is *Christ sharing His life through us* which operates as we *hear God's voice* (experience faith) and are empowered by Him to do what we hear (= "the obedience *arising from faith*," cf. Ro 1:5, 16:26).

Though love (*agapē*) is infinitely *broad* it has a *very specific core-meaning*: "what God *prefers*" – i.e. "*as He is, so are we in this world*" (1 Jn 4:17).

Love (26/*agapē*) in its strict (biblical) sense is Christ living His life through the believer (1 Jn 4:17). Here the Lord's inbirthing of faith "energizes itself *through* love" (Gal 5:6; cf. Eph 6:23, Gk text).

Note also the important sequence in 2 Tim 2:22, "Continuously pursue righteousness, *faith*, *love*, and peace." We share God's love (*agapē*) by living out the faith He works in – *with* Him.

Key quotes

- Ignatius (about AD 100), "Faith is the *beginning*, love the *end*. And these two *in union are divine*. All other things relating to a holy life are consequences of these" (Eph 14.1; SHD, 66).
"Other virtues are *daughters* of faith (Hermas, *Vis* 3.8.3,4; *Mand* 5.2.3). *Faith and love are the whole sum of the Christian life* (Ignatius, *Smyrna* 6.1)" (ala Thomas Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 146).
- Martin Luther, "Faith *receives* (from God), love *gives*" (WA, 8.355, 362ff., EA 9.280f).
"Faith brings man to God; love brings God to men" (*Freedom of the Christians*, MLS, 79-81).
- F. B. Meyer (1 Cor 13:13), "Faith is the root, hope is the stem, and love is the flower."
- K. Wuest, *Biblical love* ("God living *His life* through ours") is never merely human, but rather is "*produced* in the heart of the believer *by the Holy Spirit*."
- Nigel Turner, Love is "the *perfect compatibility* of God and man . . . the [outworking of the] *very nature of God Himself*" (*Christian Words*, 261,262, italics added).
Reflection: Trisha Fesler, "Faith and love must be *carried out* or it dies in the heart."

Key Scriptures

1 Jn 4:8: "The one who does not love, does not know God, *for God is love (26/agapē)*" (NASB).

1 Jn 4:16: "We have come to know and have believed the *love (26/agapē)* which God has for us. *God is love (26/agapē)*, and the one who abides *in love (26/agapē)* abides in God, and God abides in him" (NASB).

Observations

1. "God is love" means He has a preference about *everything* – by *the necessity of His own being!* Moreover, *God alone determines* what love is because He "is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

We must *first love God therefore to genuinely love people* (which is contrary to human logic and liberal religious teaching). We actually *miss the power of biblical love* by "loving people *our way!*" See 1 Cor 13:2,3.

1 Jn 5:2: "By this we know that we love the children of God, *when we love God* and observe His commandments" (NASB).

Reflection: The Christian life is *not* loving people as we think we should – and then deducing we "must" have faith and love! We must first wait on God to get *His* direction on what to do (when to act, etc.) to act *in love* ("divine preference," 26/agapē).

Love (26/agapē) is expressed by living *out* the faith God works *in* (see Gal 5:6; Eph 6:23, Gk text). Love works out faith *and hope* (cf. 1 Cor 13:13; see also Gal 5:6, Gk text). Indeed, faith gives the "title-deed" of *what to hope for* (see Heb 11:1, Gk text).

2. Love (26/agapē) is "unconditional" as an *offer from God* – *but not its execution!*

[God's *offer* to love us is unconditional in this sense: He *continuously offers* it to *bring His righteousness* (God's approval); cf. the priority "righteousness" in the important sequence in 2 Tim 2:22.)]

The Lord alone determines love and when (how) it is shown, because "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8,16). Accordingly, biblical love is *never* defined by *our neighbor or ourselves* (making it *very conditional* from the Lord's standpoint!).

Reflection: Meeting human needs is important, but this can only *really happen* by sharing God's love. Genuine love is always *God-inspired* and *God-*

empowered. The *Lord* must inspire an action and empower it for it to qualify as genuine love (26/*agapē*).

Note the important *ordering* (relating to *love*) in the two great commandments: we are to love *God first – before* people (Mk 12:30,31).

3. Love (26/*agapē*) *acts* out the revelation (persuasion) God inbirths through faith. Thus *no one* ever has the "right" ("prerogative") *to determine what love is or should be* – including the needy person requesting love!

[Biblical love *actively* lives *out* what God works *in* through His inbirthings of faith (cf. 1 Jn 4:17 with 1 Jn 5:4).]

The Lord is the foot and we are the "shoe" – *He* is the hand and we act as the "glove." Thus *love* always means *partnering with God to perform* His will, *with* Him – not just *for* Him! In this sense, *faith* is "passive" (because *received*) and *love* is *active* (as the outworking of God's inworking).

[Love typically expresses itself in *physical action*. Even when it is "intransitive," love is *transitive in desire* (focusing on *outreach*).]

Gal 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working itself out through* (the divine activity of) *love*."