

## All You Need Is Love (Week 4) - Beloved Family Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. The late Christopher Hitchens, one of the most vocal and vehement atheists of the last 40 years, would declare with regularity that to him the idea of Christian love among Christians seemed like no more than white noise, a kind of meaningless, sanctimonious sentiment devoid of substance and moral weight. Moreover, he would claim that Christians used it to obscure or deflect from

some of their more distasteful, authoritarian doctrines. This should make us pause - is "Christian love" merely a superficial, saccharine slogan largely detached from what we believe, who we are, what we care about, and how we behave?

2. During this sermon, we want to look at the key terminology for Christian "love" used in the New Testament. First, let's start with this observation - no less than 13 times in the five chapters of 1st John, the writer calls fellow Christians "brothers" and "sisters." Other N.T. letters follow suit.

3. The best single verse to understand what's behind this label for fellow Christians is Romans 12.10a, which reads (with the key words capitalized): "LOVE one another with MUTUAL AFFECTION..." Ancient Greek has eight primary words that we often translate into English as "love." Romans 12.10 uses two of them, one meaning the close companionship and shared admiration among friends and the other focused on the love shared by family. So we could translate Romans 12.10a more literally like this: "Care for and appreciate each other like the best of friends who are family." In short, Christians were to be "a family of friends." You can find the same idea in places like the second half of [1st Peter 1.22](#).

4. The early Christians practiced what sociologists called "fictive kinship," that is, a definition of family that goes beyond mere blood or legal ties. And this set them apart from Greco-Roman culture at large. New Testament scholar Joseph Hellerman writes that we see in the early church that "God was not only establishing a series of isolated personal relationships with individuals, but was creating a family of sons and daughters - siblings - who are now all one in Christ Jesus." United Methodist pastor Tom Berlin asserts that these earliest believers were constantly "expanding the circle" of who was included in their family of faith, from the poor to the slave to the widow to the orphan, and other likewise marginalized or overlooked people.

5. Knowing that Christians sought to be a "family of friends," we're left to ask ourselves: a) Is our connection to KirkWood and its people greater than merely attending a worship service or serving in a ministry, and does it rise to the level of "a family of friends?"; b) Are you cultivating relationships with a few folks at KirkWood with whom you share mutual admiration and close connection?; c) Who is missing, not present, or perhaps not welcome at KirkWood, and how can we "expand the circle" to include and embrace them?



6. If "a family of friends" is a good summary of the first set of key terms for Christian love, here's the second word we need to unpack - agape (pronounced "a-gop-ay"). It's notoriously hard to translate into English, but centers on the idea of self-giving, sacrificial, non-transactional, unearned love (as seen in these two passages, in which every appearance of the word "love" is agape - [1st John 4.9-10](#) and [The Gospel of John 15.12-13](#)). Maybe most insightfully, while the verb and noun forms of agape are used over 250 times in the New Testament, making it far and away the most common term for "love," in all the Greco-Roman literature we possess today it is used only once. That means whatever else it is, Christian agape stands in stark contrast to its surrounding culture.

7. There are several takeaways from agape as a - maybe THE - indivisible component of Christian love. First, agape requires us to live in a necessary, dependent cycle of giving and receiving. Why? Because no one can keep on giving the best of themselves to others without being refilled; to keep on giving without receiving is to dry up and be empty eventually. So among Christians who may be (far) more comfortable giving than asking to receive, it's mandatory to have people who give to us in an agape kind of way so that we can give agape to others.

8. Second, we often mistake agape as requiring big, sacrificial acts of love, but the way we'll most often experience it is in small, daily acts of undeserved self-giving love. It's less laying down in traffic for someone and more slowing down to listen, giving time that could go elsewhere, doing what others won't or can't do, etc. It's akin to this well-known line from the late Mother Teresa: "There are no great things, only small things done with great love."

9. Last, agape tells us that we do or act benevolently as a matter of Christian duty or obligation. We aren't always motivated by our positive feelings for someone. We choose to love and give because God continues to love and give to that same person. Feelings often follow action, not so much the other way around. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love your neighbor'; act as if you do. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

10. So these are the two big ideas about Christian love in the New Testament - "a family of friends" and "agape." So contrary to Christopher Hitchens, Christian love is not innocuous, insubstantial white noise but is in fact the fundamental structure of reality because God is defined as love itself. Therefore, a life without love as its chief aim and priority isn't just unkind, tone deaf, or misguided, it is ultimately useless, flawed in its very foundation, and profoundly, incurably empty. To love someone is to see them as they truly are - a being of infinite value, a beloved child of God as significant as you are. Love is the lens that corrects our blurred vision of others. If love is our starting point, then we need not fear what we might do or say along the way. Love is the most reliable safeguard and moral compass we could ever hope to find. Moreover, Christian love does the seemingly-impossible: it frees us from the gravitational grip that is our own ego and self-interest, and it makes others, even strangers, as important and worthwhile as we are. And make no mistake, this kind of Christian love is no less countercultural today as it was 2000 years ago.

## "A Family of Friends" and "Agape" This Week

- Spend some time reflecting on the applicational questions or points in the sermon summary above, notably points 5 and 7 through 9. How can you take a step into KirkWood as a "family of friends," or what idea do you have that would help us live that more? How can you live "agape" a little more day to day, and toward whom?
- Here's a week's worth of short devotional, suitable for teens and adults, on Christian love:
  - [New Commandment](#)
  - [Sharing and Caring](#)
  - [Rules of the Game](#)
  - [Complete and Perfect Love](#)
  - [Love Takes Work](#)
  - [Unrestrained Love](#)
  - [Love Remains](#)
- Here are some good, short articles on agape love:
  - [Renovaré | The Nature of Agape Love - Dallas Willard](#)
  - [Agape | The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute](#)
  - [Agape Love: How to Love Unconditionally](#)
- Here are two short videos about agape love:
  - [Agape - Love](#)
  - [Martin Luther King on "Agape," a Form of Love at the Core of Nonviolent Resistance](#)