

God is Agape

Heart to Heart, Part 7

1 John 4:7-21

Alexander Strauch's book entitled, *Leading with Love* opens with a story from the life of Dwight L. Moody. Strauch retells that signature event when D. L. Moody invited Henry Moorhouse to preach at Moody's church every night for a week.

To everyone's surprise, Moorhouse preached seven consecutive sermons from John 3:16. D. L. Moody's son recorded the impact of this preaching in the life of his father:

He wrote, "For six nights he had preached on this one text. The seventh night came and he went into the pulpit. Every eye was upon him. He said, 'Beloved friends, I have been hunting all day for a new text, but I cannot find anything so good as the old one; so we will go back to the third chapter of John and the sixteenth verse'; then he added, 'for a whole week I have been trying to tell you how much God loves you, but I cannot do it with this poor stammering tongue. If I could borrow Jacob's ladder and climb up into heaven and ask Gabriel, who stands in the presence of the Almighty to tell me how much love the Father has for the world, all he would say is, 'God so loveth the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'"

Moody confessed later: I never knew up to that time [how] God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out – it was like news from a far country: I just drank it in – and so did the crowded congregation.

Moody would later credit that series of messages with changing his life.ⁱ

It seems that Henry Moorhouse and the Apostle John have this in common . . . their recurring theme is the love of God.

In fact, for the third time in his first letter, the Apostle John returns to the subject of love. From *verse 7* to the end of *chapter 4*, John's first epistle will mention love over and over again.

You could circle that word 27 times in just the *last 14 verses* of chapter 4 – 27 times.

No wonder Augustine, the church leader and theologian from the 4th century would write, "John has spoken many words, and nearly all of them are about love."ⁱⁱ

Now the fact that John circles around to the subject of love again doesn't mean that he's run out of stuff to write about and needs to start repeating himself in order to make it to chapter 5.

No, what John will do is take us a little further and a little deeper into the subject of love.ⁱⁱⁱ

Just about everything that John writes in *these next 14 verses* will have been discussed already – but what he does here is drop in some new phrases and some key thoughts that expand his earlier treatment – and I'll focus our time in this study on those new phrases and thoughts.

Let me give you four statements about love from this last portion of 1 John chapter 4.

The first statement is this:

1. Love is who God is (verses 7 & 8)

Verse 7- Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Everyone who is born again – born of God – has the capacity to reflect the character and nature of God who is love.

John again selects the word for love, translated here from agape.

Let's pause for a moment and consider the fact that John had several words to choose from his Greek culture and language. He could have used *storge* – the word for family devotion – family commitment – the love for family.

You don't see your aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins but once or twice a year and when you do there is that bond of family.

You might not really like them, but you love them in a family loyalty kind of way, right?

As one author said, "You'll visit them, but you never want to go on vacation with them."

John could have selected the popular word *philia* – translated love. *Philia* is what we call, brotherly love.

Philadelphia is named after that word – the city of brotherly love; anyone here from Philadelphia – that incredibly loving city?

Philia is the Greek word for warmth and affection and friendship and it was one of the most popular words in John's day for love.

One Greek scholar wrote that *philia* is a kind of love built on common insight or interest or taste.^{iv}

It bound people affectionately together because of similar lifestyles and pursuits and occupations.

This is what we could call the love of mutual attraction.

The problem with *philia* is that this kind of love can really be all about me, myself and I.

It can simply represent loving someone because they laugh at the same jokes or they like the same sport or restaurant or they're always catering to my whims and wishes, which makes me really happy they're around.

Someone whose bond with another person is nothing more than *philia* is someone who really never gets past themselves. In fact, when they say they love you, what they really mean is – in reality – "I love me and you make me feel good about me – and I want to keep you around me because you make me feel happy."

Just listen to the music about love – it's all about that warm and fuzzy feeling – "I'm hooked on a feeling . . . and I can't stop loving you." "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah."

Okay, so I'm stuck in the 70's.

But how many of you recognized those lyrics? Remember this one? "Why do birds suddenly appear; every time you are near? Just like me – say it with me – they long to be, close to you."

You are stuck back there too.

How wonderful is that? We've gotta put out bird feeders to coax the birds into our back yard – but for you – birds appear every time you are near . . . but think about it –

Who would want to fall in love with a guy who has birds following him around?^v

Every time he comes to your door – there's that flock of birds!

That sounds like a scary movie.

But just go on the internet like I did this week – because I never listen to the radio unless I'm driving – and I confirmed once again that the most popular subject in music today is still all about that kind of you-meet-my-needs-and-you-make-me happy-kind of love.

Now *philia* can have a good side, because there is a good side to warm affectionate, friendship by those who share common interests.

But that isn't the deepest bond.

The word John uses over and over is *agape*. This is love in terms of loving the unlovely; self-sacrificing commitment – a bond made up of the will – which then guides the affections and emotions.

I read recently that in non-biblical Greek literature, *agape* rarely ever showed up. *Eros* – sexual attraction or physical love, *epithumia* – another word for fiery, passionate love, along with *storge* and *philia* were the world's favorite words for love – and they still are.

However, get inside the New Testament and everything is reversed.

Eros never appears even once; *storge* only a few times, *philia*, a little more than 50 times, but *agape* shows up 320 times.^{vi}

Over and over again – like here in ***First John 4***.

And why not – John writes here, this is who God is.

God is the very definition and illustration of committed, self-sacrificing, condescending, faithful love in the entire universe.

John effectively writes, God *is* *agape*.

God is *agape* personified – He does it because He *is* it.^{vii}

Now be careful here; this a wonderful truth for the believer, but probably one of the most abused, misinterpreted truths by unbelievers.

About the time you corner someone with the gospel truth of their need for Christ and that coming judgment before a righteous and holy God, they are more than likely going to say, “Oh, but God is love.” It says that somewhere in the Bible, doesn’t it? God is love.

God will never condemn anyone – there can’t be a real hell out there somewhere because God is love. Well . . . God is *indeed* love.

John also wrote in *chapter 1 and verse 5 of this letter, God is light (1 John 1:5)* – another aspect of His divine nature.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, “*God is a consuming fire*” – that’s not one of the top ten verses out there . . . *God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29)*.

Most people want to think of God as a warm candle, not a consuming fire.

Every cult that tries to use the Bible in addition to whatever else they come up with have this in common – they emphasize one facet of God’s nature or one key verse of scripture and then basically ignore just about everything else.^{viii}

Study the scriptures and discover not only the many facets to the nature and character of God, discover the relationship between them.

And John specifically wants us to understand the relationship between the love of God and the gospel of God – the relationship between who God is and what God did.

You see, love is not only who God is, secondly;

2. Love is why God died (9-11)

Notice verse 9. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

- Philia says – I love you because you are so much like me;
- Agape says – I love you even though you aren’t anything like me.
- Storge – I love you because you belong to my family.
- Agape says – I love you and want to make you a member of my family.

Several key words or phrases are added to what John has written earlier.

Notice in *verse 9* that God – the Father that is – *sent His only begotten son into the world.*

The word for begotten doesn’t mean Jesus didn’t exist until His birth. The word for begotten is monogenes (μονογονης); it’s a compound Greek word made up of monos – meaning single or one; and genos which means kind (one of a kind). It refers to uniqueness, not origin.

Jesus is one of a kind. He is God’s only Son – which means He has no equal as the Son of God and is uniquely qualified to reveal the essence and deity of the Godhead in bodily form (Colossians 1).

There’s another interesting word in relation to Jesus’s deity – it’s this phrase – *God sent* Jesus. God sent Him. This speaks of His pre-existence.^{ix}

Babies aren’t sent by God – and they’re not delivered by storks either – I hope that doesn’t mess up anything for you if you’re children are in here with you.

Babies don’t exist prior to conception – they are gifts from God, but they are not sent by God.

Yesterday was the due date of our first grandchild. Much to everyone’s chagrin the due date came and went.

Benjamin called me last night . . . I answered, “Yeah!” That’s how I’m answering the phone these days – Yeah! Dad, nothing’s happening. “Oh” . . . As the Apostle Paul would say, “Phooey!” That’s an ancient Greek word.

We’re waiting for him to be born, not sent.

Jesus was both born and sent.

He preexisted from eternity past – and being born, He was also sent.

And He was sent for a purpose. John writes in *verse 10, to demonstrate the love of God for the world.*

The willing sacrifice of Christ had been pictured prophetically in that signature event where Abraham and his only son Isaac climbed Mt. Moriah. God had told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac – the son of promise through whom would come the people of God – and Isaac obediently went along with his father’s will.

Most of us miss the glory of that event because we picture Abraham and a little boy Isaac who probably pestered his daddy with, “Where’s the animal Daddy . . . where’s the animal.”

He did ask that question . . . and at some point Abraham said, “You will be the sacrifice” and then he picked up his little boy and laid him on the altar, right?

If you'd like to read sometime the entire narrative, it's found in Genesis 21, when Isaac is born and chapter 22 where Isaac is on that altar.

What's lost on us is the willingness of Isaac – Abraham's only son – to die. And that's because the typical Sunday school curriculum misses the fact that there are 20 years or more between Genesis chapter 21 and chapter 22.

Isaac isn't a little boy – he's more than likely in his early 30's – and I would guess, though I can't be sure – that Isaac is exactly the same age as Jesus, whom he prefigured – who also willingly offered himself on a wooden altar, fulfilling the prophesy that God would provide a lamb.

Isaac was willing to give up his life – which is why Jesus was sent.

The death of Jesus wasn't an accident, it was an appointment.^x

He didn't die as a martyr whose plans went awry. He died as a conqueror, right on schedule.

Peter would preach on the Day of Pentecost that Jesus was crucified by *the predetermined plan of God (Acts 2:23)*

We're also told even more specifically here by John that Jesus was sent, here in the latter part of *verse 10, to be the propitiation for our sins.*

That word, *propitiation*, is the word hilasmos – it means, basically, satisfaction; or more theologically, the fully atoning sacrifice for sin.^{xi}

God the Son satisfied the worthy demands of holy justice against sinners; by serving their death sentence – taking their place as both dying man and infinite God.

Now any kind of illustration is going to fall short of all the significance of this dying sacrificial act of God the Son, but let me give you one that might at least hint at the meaning of propitiation.

I'll never forget reading about one Midwestern fire that swept across the prairie, devastating crops and houses, and anything else that stood in its path. One particular family saw the smoke a long ways off – it wasn't long before they knew that they could never outrun it – they had nowhere to run or hide. Then the father did something – he ran and got a brand from the fireplace and started their field on fire – he knew it would be burnt soon enough – he also lit fires all around that area so that the wind swept the fire along a mile or so ahead of the coming prairie fire. Then he and his family drove their wagon to the middle of their, now burned, field. There they stopped and waited – within a few

moments that great wall of fire came to the edge of their field toward them. Finding nothing to feed its hunger, it licked its way around and along the sides of the field the farmer had already torched. Then that huge wall of flame picked its way back up on the other side of them and moved away.

They were safe. Why? Because they were standing on ground that had already been burned. That ground they were standing on was their *propitiation*. It had already endured the fire, satisfied its demands and thus, could not be burned again.

Do you know why you will never have to face the wrath of God in fiery judgment? Because you stand in Christ, He is your propitiation – and holy justice has already consumed Him as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin – and God the Father is satisfied with Jesus and because you are by faith in Jesus Christ, God is satisfied with you too!

Why would God the Son ever do that for you and me? Because he loves you . . . because God is agape!

- Love is not only who God is;
- Love is not only why God died – thirdly;

3. Love is what God does (12-16)

God has said something *to* us – God has done something *for* us – and now God wants to do something *through* us.^{xii}

Notice *verse 12. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.*

John is more than likely refuting the false teachers in his generation who were claiming to have seen God through personal and special visions.^{xiii}

John effectively says these false teachers are lying in order to gain an advantage for their false teaching.

To this day, so much of false teaching, cults, cult leaders, false religions, all claim to have heard from God beyond the Apostles – who gave us the completed New Testament.

John says, “No, no . . . no one has seen God at any time – past or present.”

Even Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel saw God through what theologians refer to as theophany or some physical manifestation of some part or portion of the glory of God.^{xiv}

God the Father and God the Spirit have chosen to reveal themselves through the person of Jesus Christ – God the Son.

He is the embodiment of deity – the image of invisible God. (Colossians 1:15)

Here’s John’s point – since no one has seen God the Father, ever, and since Jesus Christ is no longer visible – for the time being – people are not going to be able to see God’s love unless believers demonstrate it.^{xv}

In fact, John writes here in **verse 12 that God’s love is perfected in us.**

That doesn’t mean *we’re* perfect – at least not yet – it means that God’s love is perfected in and through us – that is, God’s love is completed – it is accomplished in and through us.

One author put it this way; God’s love is made real, tangible, concrete in and through the Christian fellowship when the children of God practice love toward one another.^{xvi}

And certainly to the rest of the world too.

Whenever the Christian rejects the worlds definition of love – that it’s all about me – it’s all about meeting my needs – it’s all about my plans and my wishes – whenever the Christian rejects that and demonstrates the agape love of self-sacrifice and humility and condescension and commitment – the world intuitively knows that they have just seen a demonstration of love from some other planet – some other place – some other origin.

In fact, notice, that stunning implication at the end of **verse 17 – because as He is, so also are we in this world.**

God is at work through us, in the world.

You can’t see the wind – but you can see the effects of the wind’s presence. You can’t see God, but you can see the effects of God’s presence – it’s called agape.^{xvii}

- Love is not only who God is;
- Love is not only why God died;
- Love is not only what God does . . . let me take it one step further – fourthly;

4. Love is what God demands (19-21)

Notice verse 19. We love, because He first loved us.

God expects us to love because He first loved us.

By the way, this phrase reveals the mystery of election. We love because He first loved us.

The love relationship we have with God began with God. We had nothing to do with it at first. How could we – ***we were dead in sins and trespasses (Ephesians 2:1).***

- Can a dead person love? No.
- Can a dead person drink from living water? No.
- Can a dead person respond to the Bread of Life? No.

It takes the initiating, life-giving faith from God the Father who moves in grace and sovereign mercy toward us. Our eyes are opened by means of the gift of faith and we then recognize our sin and our need for the Savior – we respond with our will to the merciful will of the Father and say “Yes” to Jesus.

This is the mystery of divine election. If any of you can figure it out, please write it down and then choose the Caribbean island you will be able to buy from your book sales – buy me one too.

I’ve had people ask me, “Listen, if I believe in election, how do I know if I’m elect?” That part’s easy – have you said “Yes” to Jesus Christ? Are you trusting in God the Son alone as your satisfaction for salvation?

Yes! Great – you’re elect!

Paul writes to the Corinthians, **“No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3)**

It is only by the work of the Holy Spirit that anyone will truly find satisfaction in the cross work of Christ.

I meet a lot of people who are not satisfied in Jesus for their salvation – there’s gotta be something more.

But for those satisfied with Christ, John effectively writes here in **verse 17**, there’s no need to fear the judgment of God.

Why? John writes here in **verse 18**. Why? Because you are in the beloved – you are both loved by God and (**verse 19**) you love God in return.

We can’t understand the God-ward side of redemption – it dips back into eternity and the mind of God. But we can understand the man-ward side of the equation.

“Whosoever will come” Mark 8:34 – and that was an invitation you responded to by the grace and the initiating love of God.

Jesus said, All that the Father gives me will come to me and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out. (John 6:37)

D. L. Moody simplified it rather nicely when he said that the world is divided into two camps – the whosoever wills and the whosoever wont’s.

Which one are you?

For those who would say, “We belong to God by His grace and in response to His gift of faith we believe in Christ alone,” John now effectively says, “Then act like it . . . act like who God is.”

Verse 20. If someone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him – in other words – here’s the demand of God from us – **that the one who loves God should love his brother also.**

Agape is not an option, it is an obligation.^{xviii}

Storge love says – Well I’ll love you if you belong to my family.

Agape says – I love you and I’m going to treat you as a member of my family.

Philia love says – I love you because you are a lot like me.

Agape says – I love you even though you are not in the remotest like me.

Eros – I love you because you meet my needs and make my heart beat fast.

Agape says – I love you and commit my heart as long as it beats to meeting your needs.

- This is the love of God.

- This is the nature of God.
- This is the grace of God.
- This is the gospel of God.

Isaac Watts summed it up so well in his hymn published 300 years ago;

Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die?

Would He devote that sacred head, for such a worm as I?

Was it for crimes that I have done, He suffered on the tree?

Amazing pity, grace unknown and love beyond degree.

- Agape is who God is
- Agape is why God died
- Agape is what God does
- Agape is what God demands – from those who claim to know Him as our Savior and Lord.

Or as Isaac Watts put it in another hymn,
*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That would be a present far too small
Love so amazing so divine
Demands my soul, my life . . . my all.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/23/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Challie.com

ii Quoted in Sam Gordon, *Living in the Light: 1, 2, 3 John* (Ambassador, 2001), p. 156

iii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *First John: Be Real* (David C Cook, 1972), p. 137

iv Adapted from Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 118

v Steve May, *The Story File*, quoting Dave Barry, “Book of Bad Songs.” (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 199

vi Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Epistles of John* (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 107

vii Gordon, p. 155

viii Adapted from Hobbs, p. 109

ix Gordon, p. 159

x Gordon, p. 161

xi Hiebert, p. 203

xii Adapted from Gordon, p. 163

xiii Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible: 1, 2 & 3 John* (Tyndale, 1998), p. 94

xiv Roy L. Laurin, *First John: Life At its Best* (Kregel, 1987), p. 156

xv Adapted from MacArthur, p. 168

xvi Hobbs, p. 112

xvii Adapted from John Phillips, Exploring the Epistles of John (Kregel, 2003), p. 143

xviii Laurin, p. 162