



Love

Without qualification, without ifs, ands, or buts, God's word tells us, straight as a left jab, that love is the greatest thing there is (1 Cor 13: 13). Scripture never says God is justice or beauty or righteousness, though he is just and beautiful and righteous. But “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). Love is God's essence, his whole being. Everything in him is love. Even his justice is love. Paul identifies “the justice of God” in Romans 1:17 with the most unjust event in all history, deicide, the crucifixion, for that was God's great act of love.

But no word is more misunderstood in our society than the word love. One of the most useful books we can read is C. S. Lewis' unpretentious little masterpiece *The Four Loves*. There, he clearly distinguishes agape, the kind of love Christ taught and showed, from storge (natural affection or liking), eros (sexual desire), and philia (friendship). It is agape that is the greatest thing in the world.

The old word for agape in English was charity. Unfortunately, that word now means to most people simply handouts to beggars or to the United Fund. But the word love won't do either. It means to most people either sexual love (eros) or a feeling of affection (storge), or a vague love-in-general. Perhaps it is necessary to insist on the Greek word agape (pronounced ah-gah-pay) even at the risk of sounding snobbish or scholarly, so that we do not confuse this most important thing in the world with something else and miss it, for there is enormous misunderstanding about it in our society.

The **first** and most usual misunderstanding of agape is to confuse it with a feeling. Our feelings are precious, but agape is more precious. Feelings come to us, passively; agape comes from us, actively, by our free choice. We are not responsible for our feelings—we can't help how we feel—but we are responsible for our agape or lack of it, eternally responsible, for agape comes from us; feelings come from wind, weather, and digestion. “Luv” comes from spring breezes; real love comes from the center of the soul, which Scripture calls the heart (another word we have sentimentalized and reduced to feeling). Liking is a feeling. But love (agape) is more than strong liking. Only a fool would command someone to feel a certain way. God commands us to love, and God is no fool.

Jesus had different feelings toward different people. But he loved them all equally and absolutely. But how can we love someone if we don't like him? Easy—we do it to ourselves all the time. We don't always have tender, comfortable feelings about ourselves; sometimes we feel foolish, stupid, asinine, or wicked. But we always love ourselves: we always seek our own good. Indeed, we feel dislike toward ourselves, we berate ourselves, precisely because we love ourselves; because we care about our good, we are impatient with our bad.

We fall in love but we do not fall in agape. We rise in agape.

God is agape, and agape is not feeling. So God is not feeling. That does not make him or agape cold and abstract. Just the opposite: God is love itself, feeling is the dribs and drabs of love received into the medium of passivity. God cannot fall in love for the same reason water cannot get wet: it is wet. Love itself cannot receive love as a passivity, only spread it as an activity. God is love in action, not love in dreams. Feelings are like dreams: easy, passive, spontaneous. Agape is hard and precious like a diamond.

This brings us to a **second** and related misunderstanding. Agape's object is always the concrete individual, not some abstraction called humanity. Love of humanity is easy because humanity does not surprise you with inconvenient demands. You never find humanity on your doorstep, stinking and begging.

Jesus commands us to love not humanity but our neighbor, all our neighbors, the real individuals we meet, just as he did. He died for me and for you, not for humanity. The Cross has our names on it, not the name "humanity". When Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, he said he "calls his own sheep by name" (Jn 10:3). The gospel comes to you not in a newspaper with a Xeroxed label, "Dear Occupant", but in a handwritten envelope personally addressed to you, as a love letter from God to you alone. One of the saints says that Jesus would have done everything he did and suffered everything he suffered even if you were the only person who had sinned, just for you. More than that, he did! This is no "if" ; this is fact. His loving eyes saw you from the Cross. Each of his five wounds were lips speaking your name.

A **third**, related, misunderstanding about love is to confuse it with kindness, which is only one of its usual attributes. Kindness is the desire to relieve another's suffering. Love is the willing of another's good. A father can spank his child out of love. And God is a father.

It is painfully obvious that God is not mere kindness, for he does not remove all suffering, though he has the power to do so. Indeed, this very fact—that the God who is omnipotent and can at any instant miraculously erase all suffering from this world deliberately chooses not to do so—is the commonest argument unbelievers use against him. The number one argument for atheism stems from the confusion between love and kindness.

The more we love someone, the more our love goes beyond kindness. We are merely kind to pets, and therefore we consent that our pets be put to death "to put them out of their misery" when they are suffering. There is increasing pressure in America to legalize euthenasia (so far only Nazi Germany and now Holland have ever legalized euthenasia), and this evil too stems from the confusion between love and kindness. We are kind to strangers but demanding of those we love. If a stranger informed you that he was a drug addict, you would probably try to reason with him in a kind and gentle way; but if your son or daughter said that to you, you would probably do a lot of shouting and screaming.

Grandfathers are kind; fathers are loving. Grandfathers say, "Run along and have a good time"; fathers say, "But don't do this or that." Grandfathers are compassionate, fathers are passionate. God is never once called our grandfather, much as we would prefer that to the inconveniently close, demanding, intimate father who loves us. The most frequently heard saying in our lives is precisely the philosophy of a grandfather: "Have a nice day." Many priests even sanctify this philosophy by ending the Mass with it, though the Mass is supposed to be the worship of the Father, not the Grandfather.

A **fourth** misunderstanding about love is the confusion between "God is love" and "love is God." The worship of love instead of the worship of God involves two deadly mistakes. First it uses the word God only as another word for love. God is thought of as a force or energy rather than as a person. Second, it divinizes the love we already know instead of showing us a love we don't know. To understand this point, consider that "A is B" does not mean the same as "A equals B." If A = B, then B = A, but if A is B, that does not mean that B is A. "That house is wood" does not mean "wood is that house." "An angel is spirit" does not mean the same as "spirit is an angel." When we say "A is B", we begin with a subject, A, that we assume our hearer already knows, and

then we add a new predicate to it. "Mother is sick" means "You know mother well, let me tell you something you don't know about her: she's sick." So "God is love" means "Let me tell you something new about the God you know: he is essential love, made of love, through and through." But "Love is God" means "Let me tell you something about the love you already know, your own human love: that is God. That is the ultimate reality. That is as far as anything can ever go. Seek no further for God." In other words, "God is love" is the profoundest thing we have ever heard. But "love is God" is deadly nonsense.

A **fifth** misunderstanding about love is the idea that you can be in love with love. No, you cannot, any more than you can have faith in faith, or hope in hope, or see sight. Love is an act, a force, or an energy, but persons are more than that. What we love with agape can only be a person, the realest thing there is, because a person is the image of God, who is ultimate reality, and God's name is I Am, the name for a person. If anyone says they are in love with love, that love is not agape but a feeling.

A **sixth** misunderstanding about love is the idea that "God is love" is unrelated to dogmatic theology, especially to the doctrine of the Trinity. Everyone can agree that "God is love", it seems, but the Trinity is a tangled dogma for an esoteric elite, isn't it? No. If God is not a Trinity, God is not love. For love requires three things: a lover, a beloved, and a relationship between them. If God were only one person, he could be a lover, but not love itself. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit is the love proceeding from both, from all eternity. If that were not so, then God would need us, would be incomplete without us, without someone to love. Then his creating us would not be wholly unselfish, but selfish, from his own need.

Love is a flower, and hope is its stem. Salvation is the whole plant. God's grace, God's own life, comes into us by faith, like water through a tree's roots. It rises in us by hope, like sap through the trunk. And it flowers from our branches, fruit for our neighbor's use.

Faith is like an anchor. That's why it must be conservative, even a stick-in-the-mud, like an anchor. Faith must be faithful. Hope is like a compass or a navigator. It gives us direction, and it takes its bearings from the stars. That's why it must be progressive and forward-looking. Love is like the sail, spread to the wind. It is the actual energy of our journey. That's why it must be liberal, open to the Spirit's wind, generous.

Agape is totally defenseless against an objection like Freud's: "But not all men are worthy of love." No, they are not. Love goes beyond worth, beyond justice, beyond reason. Reasons are always given from above downward, and there is nothing above love, for God is love. When he was about six, my son asked me, "Daddy, why do you love me?" I began to give the wrong answers, the answers I thought he was looking for: "You're a great kid. You're good and smart and strong." Then, seeing his disappointment, I decided to be honest: "Aw, I just love you because you're mine." I got a smile of relief and a hug: "Thanks, Daddy." A student once asked me in class, "Why does God love us so much?" I replied that that was the greatest of all mysteries, and she should come back to me in a year to see whether I had solved it. One year later to the day, there she was. She was serious. She really wanted an answer. I had to explain that this one thing, at least, just could not be explained.

Finally, there is the equally mind-boggling mystery of the intrinsic paradox of agape: somehow in agape you give yourself away, not just your time or work or possessions or even your body. You put yourself in your own hands and hand it over to another. And when you do this

unthinkable thing, another unthinkable thing happens: you find yourself in losing yourself. You begin to be when you give yourself away. You find that a new and more real self has somehow been given to you. When you are a donor you mysteriously find yourself a recipient—of the very gift you gave away.

There is more: nothing else is really yours. Your health, your works, your intelligence, your possessions—these are not what they seem. They are all hostage to fortune, on loan, insubstantial. You discover that when you learn who God is. Face to face with God in prayer, not just a proper concept of God, you find that you are nothing. All the saints say this: you are nothing. The closer you get to God the more you see this, the more you shrink in size. If you scorn God, you think you're a big shot, a cannonball; if you know God, you know you're not even buckshot. Those who scorn God think they're number one. Those who have the popular idea of God think they're “good people”. Those who have a merely mental orthodoxy know they're real but finite creatures, made in God's image but flawed by sin. Those who really begin to pray find that compared with God they are motes of dust in the sun. Finally, the saints say they are nothing. Or else (Saint Paul's words) “the chief of sinners”. Sinners think they're saints and saints think they're sinners.

Who's right? How shall we evaluate this insight? Unless God is the Father of lies (the ultimate blasphemy), the saints are right. Unless the closer you get to God the wronger you are about yourself, the five groups in the preceding paragraph (from scorners to saints) form a hierarchy of insight. Nothing is ours by nature. Our very existence is sheer gift. Think for a moment about the fact that you were created, made out of nothing. If a sculptor gives a block of marble the gift of a fine shape, the shape is a gift, but the marble's existence is not. That is the marble's own. But nothing is our own because we were made out of nothing. Our very existence is a gift from God to no one, for we were not there before he created us. There is no receiver of the gift distinct from the gift itself. We are God's gifts.

So the saints are right. If I am nothing, nothing that is mine is anything. Nothing is mine by nature. But one thing is mine by my free choice: the self I give away in love. That is the thing even God cannot do for me. It is my choice. Everything I say is mine is not. But everything I say is yours is mine. C. S. Lewis, asked which of his many library books he thought he would have in heaven, replied, “Only the ones I gave away on earth and never got back”. The same is true of our very self. It is like a ball in a game of catch: throw it and it will come back to you; hold onto it and that ends the game.