

How to Love

25 March 2020

Matthew 22:39

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.¹

Intro

Well, as someone who has a “face for radio”, I am happy to have the opportunity to record these last sessions of our class. I deeply miss the interaction of our Sunday mornings together but I hope that our time apart will be brief.

I especially miss the dynamics of being with you in person. Recording in a quiet room with a manuscript is more limiting than having my notes and exercising some liberty in tangents and rabbit holes. Besides, I know if I start down a rabbit hole I’ll have to go back and type it all out.

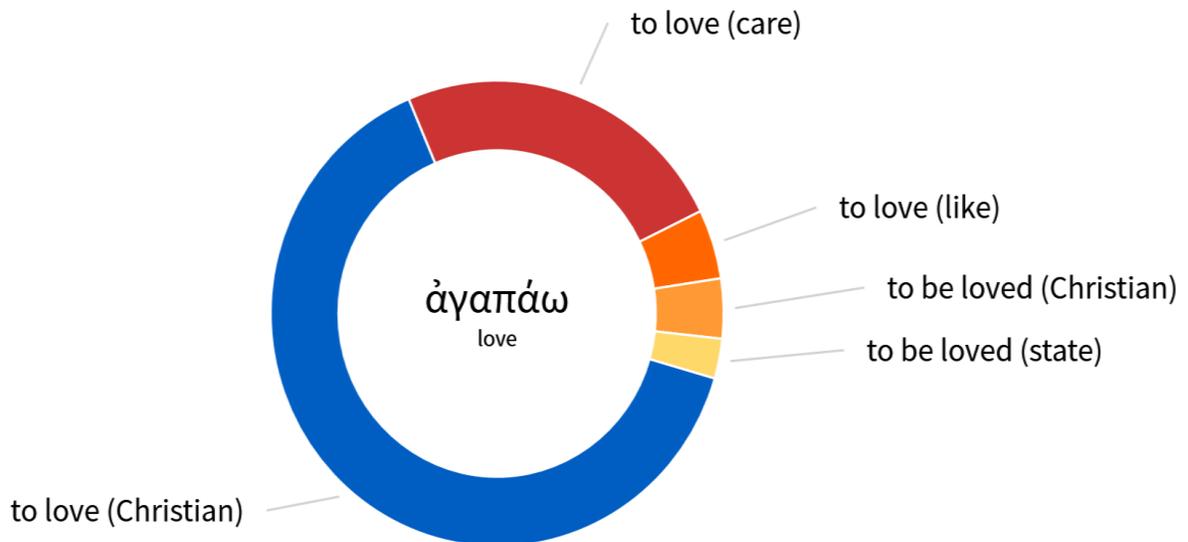
Brief review

We have been following C. S. Lewis’ helpful examinations of these three loves: storge, which is maternal or familial love, eros which is sexual love and finds its best example in the love between a husband and wife, and phileo which is brotherly love. When we get to the fourth love, agape, we begin to move away from Lewis and focus more on Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. This is primarily because Lewis did not think he could adequately expound on so great a subject as Godly charity.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 22:39). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

On one particular point which I will explain in the final session, both Lewis and Kierkegaard offer great assurance and help to those who once loved but now grieve.

While Kierkegaard is a philosopher he reasons from the perspective of a Christian. His Works of Love is very helpful in the way we should think about loving which will inform the way we love others.



Agape is the Greek word for love that we are likely most familiar with. Many equate this word with “unconditional love” and in many cases this is correct. However, the context of the verse in which the word is used is a better indicator of the meaning than simply thinking of unconditionality in every instance.

In the verse we are considering today the use of agape is equated with its use in verse 37, which says “*And [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*”² One can hardly expect the command to love God would be anything less than what is stated – to *love* with *all* the heart, soul and mind.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 22:37). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Jesus tells us the second command that we are considering is “like” it. Some would say that the second command of what is referred to and the “royal law” is the lesser of the two. Christ indicates that the second is closely related to the first. We could not expect our love for others to equal what is commanded in our love to God. However, the first command informs the second. It is because we obey the first that we can obey the second.

I. **...as yourself**

a. *Presupposition*

Kierkegaard notes discourses normally begin with a presupposition. This commandment also contains a presupposition. However, it comes at the end of the verse. The command is to love you neighbor *as yourself*. The command, then, takes this principle – that every person loves themselves.

You may immediately disagree and say that it would be inherently selfish to love oneself and we are certainly not selfish. Or you may say that you know many who do not seem to love themselves and tend to be in a depressed state of mind. Our confession teaches that man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Yet too often we are seeking our own happiness in earthly comforts instead. And for those who seem to go so far as to loathe themselves, I would still say that they are seeking happiness. As the 17th century mathematician and theologian, Blaise Pascal said,

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.³

And Matthew Henry, commenting on the commandment states,

³ Pascal, B. (1660). *Pensees* #425. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees/pensees.viii.html>

It is implied, that we do, and should, love ourselves. There is a self-love which is corrupt, and the root of the greatest sins, and it must be put off and mortified: but there is a self-love which is natural, and the rule of the greatest duty, and it must be preserved and sanctified. We must love ourselves, that is, we must have a due regard to the dignity of our own natures, and a due concern for the welfare of our own souls and bodies.⁴

So then, the presupposed love in every person is that which is natural and tends toward the good in each individual. It follows that to love our neighbor as ourselves, we should seek what is best for their dignity and well-being. Kierkegaard notes, “...*you ought to love as you love yourself. If you can perceive what is best for [your neighbor] better than he himself, you shall not be excused because the harmful thing was his own desire, what he himself asked for.*”⁵ He continues, “...*this would mean – in spite of one’s own insight that it was harmful to him – doing it in compliance because he asked for it or in adoration because he desired it.*”⁶

We also need to understand this command does not say to abandon our care and concerns for ourselves. We are not called to hate ourselves in order to love our neighbor. We are called to love ourselves in the right way. Only then can we love our neighbor rightly. Kierkegaard says another way of describing this is, “The law is, therefore: you shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself.”

From the presupposition, we move to the command itself.

II. You **shall** love

The commandment is not subjective: not *may* or *should* – it is imperative, you shall. As a presbyter, I can get caught up in the specifics of the language in our rules. We have many instructions that state “should” which are wise actions and should be encouraged. On the

⁴ Henry, M. (1994). [*Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume*](#) (p. 1731). Peabody: Hendrickson.

⁵ Kierkegaard, S. (1962). [*Works of Love*](#) (p. 36). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

⁶ Ibid. (p. 37).

other hand, instructions that are preceded by “shall” are not negotiable. Failure to follow these instructions could have consequences later on.

Some may criticize the unwavering commandment to deny oneself and to love others. Some will say, Shouldn't the inclination rise within the individual instead of being commanded from heaven? As we will see, the commandment, in fact, frees us and best equips us to love God and love others.

According to Kierkegaard, by obeying the command to love others as yourself, that love becomes independent, immutable and happy.

a. Independent

Saying that agape love is independent is not to say that it is free in its own right. It means that it is not dependent. The love that is expressed is not based on affection for or the affinity to the beloved. Here Kierkegaard adds, “Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love made eternally free in blessed independence.”⁷

You may disagree and say how can something that is duty give us freedom. If we are bound to it, how is it freedom? The answer is similar to Luther's explanation in his work *The Bondage of the Will*. In our unregenerate state, our wills are bound to act sinfully. When we are born again by the Spirit our will is transformed as well. Our will is bound to act righteously. We act according to the inclination of our will – either as a sinner or as a Christian. Jonathan Edwards makes the same argument but uses the *Freedom of the Will* to explain the same idea. In this way it is helpful in our current consideration. Yes, it is our duty because we are Christians to obey this command and yes, we are free in Christ to do so.

⁷ Ibid (p. 52).

b. Immutable, or *changeless*

Friendship and romantic loves are preferential. We choose those we love. This preferential love is subject to change. It could be rooted in our desires or expectations in the beloved. When those things that charmed us at the beginning begin to fade our love can change. Kierkegaard notes, "Thus love loses its ardor, its joy, its desire, its originaive power, its living freshness."⁸

Also, love can also become a habit. I mentioned before, with some humor, how our habit of saying, "Love you!" at the end of every phone call can become such a habit that we involuntarily say it to the wrong individual. So, was the expression truly love then or was it merely punctuation?

Again, Kierkegaard says, "If...love undergoes the transformation of the eternal by becoming duty, it does not become characterized by habit; habit can never get power over it."⁹

He suggests that we ensure we are reminded of our duty.

King Darius, the 3rd century Persian King, was abandoned by the army of Athens during the Ionian Revolt. He swore vengeance. To that end, he commanded one of his servants to repeat to him three times a day, "Master, remember the Athenians".

Kierkegaard says have a hundred cannon sound daily to remind you of your duty to love your neighbor.

⁸ Ibid (p. 51).

⁹ Ibid. (p. 50)

Mia and I travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland many years ago. On the first day as we were walking around the city center we were startled by a loud explosion. After a moment I was reminded of what the sound was. At 1 o'clock every day (except Sunday – it's a Presbyterian country, after all!) a cannon sounds from Castle mount. You can set you watch to it. The second day we were visiting the castle and saw the firing of the cannon up close. The rest of the week we hardly noticed the sound at all although it was always there at 1PM like clockwork.

Kierkegaard warns that we not allow love to become a habit for even cannon fire can become a dull background noise due to repetition. Anything changeable can become habit. But the unchangeable duty to love cannot be changed. It is rooted in the eternal.

c. Happy

Kierkegaard states, "Spontaneous love can become unhappy, can reach the point of despair."¹⁰ The fact that the other loves are preferential and changeable means that they have the capacity for unhappiness or despair. As we will see beginning in our next session, agape love believes, hopes and builds up. It does not despair because it cannot lose. It does not despair because it is free to love. And love abides.

III. You shall love **your neighbor**

The final part of this session is the *object* of agape love. It is *your neighbor*. I don't mean Frank and Alice next door. If that was all that was commanded it would barely seem like duty to many of us. So then,

d. Who is my neighbor?

¹⁰ Ibid. (p. 54).

Jesus was being questioned by the religious leaders of the day. When he explained the command to love your neighbor as yourself, a pharisee asked, who is my neighbor? Jesus says,

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." ¹¹

Notice that Jesus didn't ask, which of these, do you suppose, is the neighbor in this parable? In reality, the priest and the Levite were much closer to the injured man by natural relation than the Samaritan. No, he asked who *proved to be* the neighbor to the injured man. As Kierkegaard notes, "This means that by recognizing your duty you easily discover who your neighbor is" ¹² Also "Christ does not speak about recognizing one's neighbor but about being a neighbor oneself." ¹³ The Samaritan

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Lk 10:30–37). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹² Kierkegaard, S. (1962). [Works of Love](#) (p. 38). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

¹³ *Ibid.* (p. 38).

was doing exactly what he would hope the man would do for him in the same situation.

e. The universal neighbor

So again, who is my neighbor? The word itself derives from near-dweller. This is not in the sense of real estate. It has more to do with who is nearest to you. Your neighbor is the *other* - the one who is near you but is not you. In this sense everyone is your neighbor. So, we cannot expect to love someone we have never encountered (though these days communication is such that even a great distance is not a limiter).

The duty to love is the call of the eternal. While we live, the duty will ever be before us. Kierkegaard notes, "Death itself cannot deprive you of your neighbor either, for if it takes one, life immediately gives you another."¹⁴

If it seems like a tiresome task, we have not grasped the command in the right way. It is a happy, changeless, freeing duty to love others as ourselves. There is no disparity in the object of our love, or as Kierkegaard states, "No, its equality appears in love's humbly turning itself outwards, embracing all, yet loving everyone in particular but no one in partiality."¹⁵

II. Conclusion

In our relation to those around us – the neighbor – there is a constant pull between the eternal and the temporal. We would rather change the eternal duty to simply a temporal, moral good. That way our "duty" is toward man and not to God. We would

¹⁴ Ibid (p. 76).

¹⁵ Ibid. (p. 78).

only have to answer to whether we were meeting the societal standard of what is considered “good” in our actions toward our fellow man. I know that much too often this is the inclination of my own heart. But heeding the eternal duty of the commandment is to heed our verse of the year, “we love because he first loved us”. The presupposition is clear: because God has loved us and redeemed us, we in turn love others in a similar way. We don’t love our neighbor in the way that God loved us or that we love God. Instead, we love them as ourselves. In no way should we consider this an easy task. Truly, without the help of the Holy Spirit it would be impossible. We should pray daily for the ability to love God completely and to love our neighbor. Brothers and sisters, let us obey the command and heed the words of our Savior to “go, and do likewise”

Beginning next week, we will look along with Kierkegaard at 1 Corinthians 13, called “the love chapter” of the Bible, and look at the attributes of a dutiful love toward our neighbor.

I look forward to speaking with you then.

I pray that you will continue to take comfort in Christ and that his peace will guard your hearts in these days of trouble.

Amen.