

ἀγάπη/ἀγαπάω (*agapē/agapaō*; love; to love)

One of the real classics of modern spiritual writing is C.S. Lewis' small book *The Four Loves*, which he published in 1960¹. In it, Lewis examines four different aspects of love, on the basis of four different Greek words that are used for love:

- * *storgē* (affection)
- * *eros* (sexual love)
- * *philia* (friendship)
- * *agapē* (divine, self-giving love)

Among these, Lewis distinguishes what he called “need-loves” and those he refers to as “gift-loves”; of these, he points out that “need-loves” have nothing in common with the love that *God* is, and that there are types of “gift-love” which, although they have much *in common* with God's way of loving, love *without any reference to Him* (e.g. a workaholic, or a parent who gives and gives and gives, but who never allows that giving to draw him/her closer to God). There are certain types of gift-love that are a basic part of our human nature, but there are *other* forms of love which we can only experience because they are a gift of God. “Divine Gift-love—Love Himself working in a man—is wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved ... Divine gift-love in a man enables him to love what is not naturally lovable—lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior, and the sneering.” (*The Four Loves*, p.128).

“Finally, by a high paradox, God enables men to have a Gift-love towards Himself. There is, of course, a sense in which no one can *give* to God anything which is not already His; and if it is already His, what have you given? But since it is only too obvious that we can *withhold* ourselves, our wills and hearts, from God, we can in that sense, also *give* them. What is *His* by right ... He has nevertheless made *ours* in such a way that we can freely offer it back to Him ... And, as all Christians know, there is another way of giving to God; every stranger whom we feed or clothe is Christ. And this apparently is Gift-love to God whether we know it or not. Love Himself can work in those who know nothing of Him. The ‘sheep’ in the parable [Matt 25:31-46] had no idea either of the God hidden in the prisoner whom they visited or of the God hidden in themselves when they made the visit.” (*The Four Loves*, pp. 128-129)

Most dictionaries of New Testament Greek specify that *agapē* has the nuance of “brotherly love, charity, tender devotion, loving concern; the love which human beings have for God, and that God has for human beings”. It is a love based on an appreciation of all that is best in the other, a love of *recognition* and *gratitude*. “The verb *agapaō* most often means ‘to value, to set great store by, to hold in high esteem’; it is a love with deep respect, which often goes along with admiration ... This esteem and goodwill tend to be expressed in appropriate words and deeds. Unlike other loves, which can remain hidden in the heart, it is essential to charity to manifest itself, to demonstrate itself, to provide proofs, to put itself on display; so much so that, in the NT, it would almost always be necessary to translate *agape* as ‘demonstration of love’.” (C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*)

“Though some persons have tried to assign certain significant differences of meaning between ἀγαπάω/ἀγάπη and φιλέω/φιλία it does not seem possible to insist upon a contrast of meaning in any and all contexts. For example, the usage in Jn 21.15-17 seems to reflect simply a rhetorical alternation designed to avoid undue repetition. There is, however, one significant clue to possible

¹ Lewis' distinctions also provide the foundation for the first part of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (*God Is Love*), published on December 25, 2005..

meaningful differences in at least some contexts, namely, the fact that people are never commanded to love one another with φιλέω or φιλία, but only with ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη. Though the meanings of these terms overlap considerably in many contexts, there are probably some significant differences in certain contexts; that is to say, φιλέω and φιλία are likely to focus upon love or affection based upon interpersonal association, while ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη focus upon love and affection based on deep appreciation and high regard. On the basis of this type of distinction, one can understand some of the reasons for the use of ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη in commands to Christians to love one another.” (E.A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*)

Some examples from the New Testament:

Agapē (143x in the N.T.):

John 15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Romans 13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Perhaps the single most famous reference is in I Corinthians 13, Paul's famous “hymn to love,” (often used at weddings), which uses *agapē* a number of times, and which concludes with this famous line: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Agapaō:

Matthew 5:43-44 ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Matthew 22:36-37 ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

Luke 7:47 ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

John 3:16 ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Galatians 2:20 ²⁰ it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Ephesians 5:2 ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Both the noun and verb forms are combined in the famous passage in I John 4, which asserts, not only that God *loves*, but that, at His very heart, God is Love:

(1 John 4:7-12) ⁷ Beloved, let us love [*agapaō*] one another, because love [*agapē*] is from God; everyone who loves [*agapaō*] is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love [*agapaō*] does not know God, for God is love [*ho theos agapē estin*]. ⁹ God's love [*agapē*] was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love [*agapē*], not that we loved [*agapaō*] God but that he loved [*agapaō*] us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved [*agapaō*] us so much, we also ought to love [*agapaō*] one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love [*agapaō*] one another, God lives in us, and his love [*agapē*] is perfected in us.

Agapē is also used as a technical term for the “love-banquets” during which the early Christians seem to have celebrated the Eucharist; Jude 1:12 criticizes people's behaviour during “your love-feasts”, and the word is also found in some of the Fathers of the Church.

The use of the word “beloved” (*agapētos*) in the New Testament:

Matthew 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 12:18 "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

Matthew 17:5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Mark 1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Mark 12:6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

Luke 3:22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 20:13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.'

Acts 15:25 we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Romans 1:7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 11:28 As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors;

Romans 12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Romans 16:5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ.

⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.

⁹ Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.

¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 4:14 I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

¹⁷ For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

1 Corinthians 10:14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

2 Corinthians 7:1 Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.

2 Corinthians 12:19 Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up.

Ephesians 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,

Ephesians 6:21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord.

Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Colossians 1:7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf,

Colossians 4:7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord.

⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

¹⁴ Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

1 Timothy 6:2 Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties.

2 Timothy 1:2 To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,

¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Hebrews 6:9 Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.

James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved.

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

James 2:5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

1 Peter 2:11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

2 Peter 1:17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

2 Peter 3:1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;

¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,

¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability.

1 John 2:7 Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard.

1 John 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

3 John 1:1 The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.

⁵ Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you;

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.

Jude 1:3 Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

¹⁷ But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;

²⁰ But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;