



The Key to Heaven

The concept you will study in this lesson is the very essence of Christianity. It is the **key** to understanding God, and the relationship He wants with us. It is truly Divine, yet so simple we can understand it and put it into practice immediately. We urge you to read and study this lesson carefully, then re-read it **often** and delve deeply into study of this magnificent principle! Most importantly, start practicing this teaching today because it truly does open the door to heaven.

The late Will Durant was a world-class historian. His life work, *The Story of Civilization*, required ten massive volumes. Near the end of his life, a newspaper reporter asked Durant to take into consideration all that he had studied and then name the most important thing in all of man's history. Without hesitation, Durant responded, "*The most important thing in all of history is the love taught by Jesus Christ.*" Durant was an agnostic, neither believing nor disbelieving in God, so his opinion is expert and impartial.

What is this love taught by Jesus? Love has at least seven different meanings in the English language. "*I love my wife*" is certainly a different meaning than "*I love football*". Usually, when we use the word *love*, we have in mind an emotional "*warm, fuzzy feeling*" toward the one loved. This is **not** the meaning of the love commanded by Jesus.

The New Testament was primarily written in Greek, and the Greek language is much more specific than English. The Greeks use four different words for *love*:

- **EROS:** This is *sexual* love. We get our word *erotic* from *Eros*. *Eros* is only indirectly used in the Bible. There is nothing inherently wrong in sexual love. God ordained it. But it only has the beauty God intended within the bonds of marriage. Outside marriage, *eros* is sinful.
- **STORGE:** This is family love, love because of common blood. We all can understand this love because we love our parents, brothers and sisters, etc.
- **PHILIA:** This is friendship love. This is the kind of love we have for our best friends. A good definition would be "*desiring to be in the company of*". We want to be with our friends. An excellent example of *philia* is the love between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel, beginning with Chapter 18:1.
- **AGAPE:** This is the greatest of all loves. This was a nondescript Greek word, little used and colorless, until the Holy Spirit infused it with a majestic, noble meaning that describes God Himself! It is one of the most used words in the New Testament, and it is vitally important for us to grasp its true meaning and apply it to our lives. A good definition of *agape* is "**to work to the highest and greatest good of**" the one loved.

Commit that definition to memory! Let's put this

meaning of *agape* to work. We are all familiar with John 3:16 which reads, "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" *Loved*, in this verse, is *agape*. Let's translate the verse using our definition. It will read this way: "*For God was so working to the highest and greatest good of the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"

How was God "working to our highest and greatest good?" The answers are obvious. We, mankind, were lost and without hope, condemned to hell in our sin for eternity. We had no way to remove our sin. God provided Jesus, His own Son, to die for us. The cost to God is beyond our comprehension.

Did we deserve this love, this "working to our good"? Mankind generally is in rebellion to God. As such, we are estranged from God, enemies. Read the entire chapter of Romans 5, but particularly verse 8 which says Christ died for us while we were sinners. *Agape*, "working to the highest and greatest good of" does not depend upon the worth, attractiveness, likeability or any other characteristic of its beneficiary. *Agape* is not an emotion. It is a decision made in the mind to agape, or work to the highest and greatest good of the one on which you want to convey this beautiful love.

This is the reason Christians are commanded and can love or agape their enemies. You may not "like" your enemy. Your enemy may be the worst of men. But you can work to his highest and greatest good, agape. Again, God is the example for us as described above.

Matthew 22:36-40 reads: *Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."*

These verses tell us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our being! How do we love, agape God? Remember our definition which translates, how do we work to God's highest and greatest good? Jesus gives us the answer in John 14:15: *If ye love me, keep my commandments.* So, if we *agape* God, we will obey what He tells us in His word, the Bible! You cannot love God, no matter what you say, unless you obey what He says! Remember that!

The second greatest commandment that Jesus gave us was to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Again, using our definition, we are to work to the highest and greatest good of our neighbour as we work to our

own highest and greatest good. The fact is, if we keep that first commandment to *agape* or work to the highest and greatest good of God, we will automatically keep the second! There is a parallel and expanded account of the lawyer's question and the answer Jesus gave in Luke 10:25-37. Read those verses now. The lawyer asked Jesus to define just who was his neighbour. Jesus then told the parable of the good Samaritan, a story familiar to most of us. This parable is as a rare gem, perfectly proportioned and precious, as it explains the actions of love, *agape*. The man going from Jerusalem to Jericho was a Jew. Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Yet, the Samaritan looked upon the Jew with compassion. In all probability, he did not like the Jew, but he worked to the Jew's highest and greatest good by tending to his wounds and taking him to the inn where he cared for him and even made provisions for the Jew when he left. This is real *agape* in action! Jesus teaches here that all mankind is our neighbour, and Christians are to work to the good of all!

Note, too, that the good Samaritan took these actions without any thought of reward of his own. *Agape*, working to the highest and great good of others, takes no thought of reward. It is an action of unselfishness.

Agape, whether working to the highest and greatest good of God, fellowman or yourself, includes commitment. The first commitment is to God. We are to put God first in all things! Every decision we make should first consider God, then others, then ourselves! What is our commitment to God? Romans 12:1 says we should give ourselves as living sacrifices and this is our reasonable service. We are wholly God's, bought and paid for by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Agape also rules in our relationships with others. Christ tells us to *agape* our wives, just as He loves the church. As the years roll by in a marriage, eros (sexual love) usually cools because of aging bodies. *Philia*, friendship or "desiring to be in the company of", may also cool. But *agape* never changes. It is not affected by aging or any other changes. If husband and wife are working to each other's highest and greatest good, they will remain committed to each other and work out any problems that arise between them. Can you see the beauty of this, the Divine order?

Agape always works, no matter the relationship. It will bring out the best in every situation, no matter the problems. If everyone practiced *agape*, we would not need police or armies because there would be no crime or war. There would be no hunger. There would be no adultery, broken homes. Peace would reign. It would be heaven on earth. Think on all the ramifications of *agape*, working to the highest and greatest good of God, neighbors, yourself.

Let's consider working to your own highest and greatest good. If you *agape* yourself, you will put this lesson into action in your own life and begin this very day! It will provide you with peace, purpose and the best life possible under your circumstances. How do you practice *agape*? First of all, you make the decision to utilize this Divine love. You obey God in what He commands. You learn what He commands in His word, the Bible. In working to your highest and greatest good (Romans 8:28), God has provided you with all you need to know for your life here in the Bible. Read this in 2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Mend your relations with others as much as you can and start

working to their highest and greatest good. Atone for past mistakes wherever possible. Make a list of important relationships (wife, family, friends, co-workers, neighbors) and decide the best ways you can work to their good. And do not forget yourself. Do not abuse your body. God tells us our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Read First Corinthians 6:19. Smoking, alcohol, chemical substances are all things the Christian should avoid.

Make Jesus Christ your example, and you will become a good example for others. Teach others about Christ at every opportunity and make disciples of them whenever possible. Persevere in your commitment to Him no matter your circumstances or adversities.

Now, let's briefly summarize ***agape***, working to the highest and greatest good of God, fellowman, oneself:

- *Agape* is Divine. It originated in Heaven. God is *agape*. 1 John 4:8.
- *Agape* is, in the world of words, in a realm all its own. If you compared the earth to the sun, *agape* is the sun! It is above all other virtues. Read 1 Corinthians 13:13 and 2 Peter 1:5-7.
- *Agape* is a decision we make. It is not an emotion. You can practice *agape* simply by making up your mind to do so and then doing it! You can begin right this moment!
- *Agape* is selfless. It does not take into consideration any thought of reward to self.
- *Agape* does not depend upon the attractiveness or likeability or any other characteristic of the beneficiary of our love.
- *Agape* is the answer in any relationship or situation. It never does harm.
- God comes **first** always. Matthew 22:37, Luke 10:27.
- We love God by obeying His commandments. We do not love Him if we do not obey His commandments.

We have merely scratched the surface in exploration of *agape*, its meaning, its facets. It is too transcendent an action for us to capture with words. We urge you, each time you read *love* in the Bible, to translate it the same way we did with John 3:16 earlier in this lesson. We believe, in this way, you will incorporate it into your mind and, if you practice it, you will gradually incorporate it into your life. It will bless your life as nothing else can.

If you have questions or want further explanation, contact us at this address:

World Bible School
A ministry of the Rainbow church of Christ
2201 Rainbow Drive
Gadsden, AL 35901

NOTE: *Agape* is the noun in Greek. Since not many of us know the Greek language, to simplify our understanding, we have used *agape* as noun, verb, etc.