

## The Negative Use of the Concept of *Agape* 'Love' in the New Testament

Upon encountering the term *agape* love in a Christian context, one typically thinks of God's love for people and the type of love people should have for God and others. C.S. Lewis dealt with the topic of Christian love in his *The Four Loves*, where he considers some of the different loves described in Greek thought: familial or affectionate love (*storge*), friendship (*philia*), romantic love (*eros*), and spiritual love (*agape*). Peter Kreeft summarizes C.S. Lewis' and others' view of the meaning of *agape* in the New Testament as the love of God, i.e., the love that God has for people and vice versa ("C.S. Lewis: The Four Loves"), and, of course, there is Paul's celebrated description of *agape* in a positive, godly sense: 1 Cor. 13:4-8a, 13.

While C.S. Lewis and others with a similar view have a correct understanding of *agape* in the New Testament in the majority of occurrences, nonetheless, there are NT examples with quite a different sense. The *New World Encyclopedia*, regarding the verb form of *agape*, '*agapao*,' comments that it is occasionally used also in a negative sense, but here and elsewhere, there is no elaboration on the significance of these negative instances ("Agape").

God's *agape* for the world was so "great that he gave his only begotten son . . ." (John 3:16), a love sacrificial and expected of his believers. If intensity and sacrifice are crucial constituents of God's love and that of his followers, commanded to love as God does (v. John 15:12), the negative instances in the NT credibly indicate that a person's love for improper recipients is likewise intense and sacrificial. For these improper objects, such a person is willing to sacrifice what or who should be treasured, while debasing the proper God-directed recipients.

This is significant because one who chose to direct such love neither to God nor his "neighbors," but to inanimate things or status, clearly shows his priorities, having opted to put his energy and resources into the latter while demeaning the former. A person cannot divide his

*agape* among appropriate and unsuitable targets; it must be one or the other. According to Jesus, the entire law and the prophets depend up on two statements: "You will love [*agapeseis*] your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind," which he called the great and first commandment, and "You will love [*agapeseis*] your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37- 40 - Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's; *UBS Greek NT*). Not to heed these commands is to break God's entire law, and not to love whom one should, but to love the improper is not merely indifference, but is disobedience, disloyalty, and loathing (see Matt. 6:24a- "Nobody can serve/be a slave to two masters. For either he will hate the one and will love [*agapesei*] the other, or he will be loyal to one and will despise the other" -- *UBS Greek NT*).

Luke 11:43 is an example of a negative use of *agape*: "Woe to y'all, Pharisees, because y'all love (*agapate*) the place of honor in the synagogues and the greetings in the marketplaces (*UBS Greek NT*)." The Pharisees do not and cannot love God along with a place of honor in the synagogues and greetings in the public arena; the exclamation of their dire peril because of their love for the latter reveals that the latter love recipients are not in God's scope of *agape's* proper attentions. Furthermore, one may logically conclude that since the Pharisees love the latter, they likewise despise God and those whom God requires his people to love. Thus, this statement of what the Pharisees love also necessarily is an implicit statement of their hatred of God's mandated recipients. Conversely, the objects of the Pharisees' love here are what God's followers ought to despise and avoid. Other examples will be included in the full presentation.

In short, the negative instances of *agapao* are blatant antitheses to God's requirements and should alert the reader/listener to sit up and take notice. They are undeniably worthy of more discussion than merely a brief aside by scholars about their existence without further comment, for they emphasize the hideousness of misdirected love's recipients, prompting God's

followers not even to entertain the thought of doing the same, but to shun them and, optimistically, prompting those misdirecting their love to admit their transgression and focus that love on God-approved recipients.

#### Bibliography

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"C.S. Lewis: The Four Loves." *The Question of God*- Program 2.WGBH Educational Foundation, Boston, MA, 2004. Transcript.

*The UBS Greek New Testament*. Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010. Print.