Post #1

What's Love Got To Do With It?

I have been troubled over the past few weeks over what I read, observe, and have experienced first-hand in the circles of the Christian fellowship. Do we understand or have a grasp of what it means to ***love*** from a Christian perspective? Evidence indicates that we do not. Recent statistics from the Barna Group show that 1 in 3 marriages will fail among the ranks of those professing Christian affiliation of some sort. We continue to see divisions, unforgiveness, slander, and gossip among other unhealthy attitudes within the rank and file of Christian fellowships as well. What is the reason for this unhealthy behavior and anti-Christian attitudes toward one another? I believe it has to do with our lack of understanding of what it means to love. I believe that, first, we do not understand the concept of Christian love; and second, we excuse ourselves from being included in applying that love. What are the repercussions of this "loveless" perception? How does it affect and effect our Christian lifestyle? Is there a Christian lifestyle without this love?

Over the coming days (maybe weeks) I plan to explore love as it is defined in our Bible. I want to know what love means and how it is effectively lived out in our day-to-day life. I don't know if I'll be posting daily with regard to this topic, but I will update the blog with its own category listing. If you want to follow this study alone, just search for the category heading of "love."

Let us begin with the words for love that are used in the Greek Language (the purpose for this is so we can understand the meaning from our New Testament teachings in the Bible).

Storge – meaning "affection" in the Modern Greek language; it is natural affection, like that felt by parents for their children. This is rarely used in ancient works.

Thelema – meaning "desire" in the Modern Greek language; most often used in the context of "desire" to "do something."

Eros – meaning "passionate" love and relating to sensual desire and/or longing.

Phileo – meaning "friendship" in the Modern Greek language; includes loyalty to friends, family, community, and requires familiarity. In the ancient texts, *philia* denoted a general type of love. <u>This is the only other word for "love" (phileo) used in the ancient text of the New Testament besides *agape*</u>.

Agape – meaning "love" in the Modern Greek language; *agape* is used in ancient texts to denote feelings for a good meal, one's children, and the feelings for a spouse. In biblical literature, its meaning and usage is illustrated by self-sacrificing, giving love to all--both friend and enemy. Christian commentators have expanded the original Greek definition to encompass a total commitment or self-sacrificial love for the thing loved.

In the coming studies I plan to ask a number of questions; some will be in search of knowledge while others will be exploring practical answers seeking application of the knowledge. I hope some of you reading along will join in. My primary role in this study is not the teacher; I am merely publishing the works of the student... "me."

Post #2

What's Love Got To Do With It?

Strong's # 5368 Phileo *(fil -eh' -o)* : used 21 times in NT
Strong's # 5384 Philos *(fee' -los)* : used 27 times in NT

Strong's #25 Agapao *(ag -ap -ah' -o)* : used 110 times in NT
Strong's #26 Agape *(ag -ah' -pay)* : used 106 times in NT

Before I begin, I should state that I am NOT a Greek scholar; nor do I make any claim that my study is absolutely exhaustive. As I pointed out in the first post, I have been disturbed by my personal observations in the circles of people professing affiliation with the ways of Jesus. Our scriptures tell us that "God is love" (1 John 4:16); this "love" is "agape" love. We believe Jesus is God; therefore, Jesus is love. If we are followers of His, shouldn't we also be love? Ok, simple premise…and I'm getting on a tangent already. My point is that I'm merely working through this process and my numbers, findings, deductions, or whatever else my words might be called may not be conclusive. Check it out for yourself, if you don't agree with what I'm sharing. Ok…that's my last disclaimer for this study; moving on now…

Alright, the use of agape or agapeo compared to phileo or philos is around 4 to 1 with agape(o) overwhelmingly the victor. This is a fact no matter how precise my count (this count particularly taken from the NAS, or New American Standard Version, Bible) is regarding these word uses. So, it seems fitting to me that a working definition of agape love should be established at this time. I've heard it said in sermons and teaching that agape love is "perfect love" or "God Love." I suppose I can agree with that, but it (definition "god love" - "perfect love") seems a little ethereal-vague-esoteric to me. How then, can we describe *agape love* in a way that we can "touch" it? Is there a tangible description of love (agape) that we can wrap our minds around? I think there is and I believe it is found in the great Love Chapter of the apostle Paul's letter to Corinth. Let's look at this passage of scripture from 1 Corinthians 13:

> "...but *(if I)* have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." 1 Corinthians 13:2-8

What is being proposed here in this passage? I believe it is the physical evidence of love, agape love. Paul states; "love (agape) is…" and then proceeds to list the evidences of love. Let us take a closer look.

Love is:

• Patient • Kind • Rejoicing with truth • Always protecting • Always trusting • Always hopeful • Always persevering • Never failing	• ***Not*** envy • ***Not*** boastful • ***Not*** proud • ***Not*** rude • ***Not*** self-seeking • ***Not*** easily angered • ***Not*** a keeper of wrong-doings • ***Not*** a delighter in evil

Now, with a rough sketch to work from, let us begin external and internal evidence of this love. We'll begin asking the first question of ourselves. Is THIS LOVE (see above descriptions) evidenced and realized in my life? We'll examine the answers and more specific questions in later posts.

Post #3

What's Love Got To Do With It?

We completed our last post with a working definition for **"love"** *agape-style*, a wild-eyed-nostrils-flared-ears-pinned-to-the-side-of-your-head-all-out-sprint-with-no-holds-barred kind of love. This is the kind of love our God, our Jesus, has called us to. Once more, let's examine at a glance what this love looks like in a practical sense.

Love is…	**Love is not or does not…**
Patient	*Envy*
Kind	*Boastful*
Rejoices with Truth	*Proud*
Always Protects	*Rude*
Always Trusts	*Self-seeking*
Always Hopeful	*Easily Angered*
Always Perseveres	*Keep Wrong-doings*
Never Fails	*Delight in Evil*

Now, with a rough sketch to work from, let us begin to examine external and internal evidence of this love. We'll begin asking the first question of ourselves. Is THIS LOVE (see above descriptions) evidenced and realized in my life? More specifically, is this type of love attainable? I mean, really…can we do it? There are well-intentioned, Jesus-believing, Christian professing "saints" that say "no;" on this side of heaven, we are unable to love in or with this capacity. Some "saints" might be generous enough in their belief to say that it is ***possible*** to embrace and embody this love, but highly ***improbable*** that anyone actually will. I contend that both of these responses are rationalizations and do not support what the Bible (OT, NT, Jesus, and apostolic teaching) purports. We **ARE** supposed to love in (and with) this capacity, but enough with conjecture…we need scriptural evidence.

I don't intend for this "evidence" to be exhaustive, but I do believe it will support my ***"are supposed to love"*** assertion. Should any reader of this post have debate with my claim, I welcome any evidence or contrary opinion to this discussion; however for this case, I am keeping my supporting text to a minimum. Moving on…

We are supposed to love "*Agape Style*." Jesus said so:

> *34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*." **John 13:34-35**

Lest we think this command is relegated to only those "brothers & sisters" in the faith…Jesus extends the "Agape Style" love outside of the circle:

> *44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?* **Matthew 5:44-46**

So there is no misunderstanding toward the directness of Jesus' command, He makes it absolutely clear in this directive:

> *9 "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. 11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. 12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 17 "This I command you, that you love one another.* **John 15:9-12, 17**

All of the above uses of the word "love" are agapao or agape which is defined within the context of our "practical" (or "what it looks like") definition we have outlined in this, and the last, post. Try as I might, I am unable to consider the possibility that Jesus expects our love to be other than "**perfect** love," agape-style love… I do believe and agree that it is a difficult way of love…near impossible; especially so if embarked upon under the power of ***self*** (more on this later). On the other end of our argument of "near impossibility" is Jesus' qualification for His commandment to love agape-style.

> *4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.* **John 15:4-5**

> *20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* **John 17:20-23, 26**

…The Spirit of Jesus in us, the believer. The Spirit of God, the Father, in us…the believer, so that *"the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* (John 17:26) We are (as His followers) supposed to love with this complete and perfect love…agape love…God love; "the love **you** (God the Father) have for **me** (Jesus the Son of God) may be in **them** (us, believers, disciples of Jesus) and that I myself may be in them."

Why do we fail at this style of love? Why is it that we continue to rationalize, excuse, and/or justify our reasons for failure in loving as Jesus loved…as Jesus commands us to love? I don't know the answer for everyone, but I believe some iteration of my position could be applied to most everyone. I believe that our failure to love agape-style begins with the perpetuation of self (remember our working definition stated, love is not self-seeking or proud). We tell ourselves that "we are imperfect" and that "God, knows my heart." These are true statements. We are imperfect and God does know our heart. It is for these reasons that He sent Himself to (1) die for our imperfections and cleanse/replace our deceitful hearts (2) fill and renew our very soul with His OWN HOLY SPIRIT. The fact that we are still comfortable to "claim imperfection and limit the power of God's Holy Spirit in us indicates one of two possibilities (1) our "heart" has not been changed or (2) we do not believe God's claims and promises are true. The conclusion of our reasoning, "I am in Him and He is in me, yet I am incapable of loving like Him" is an illogical and false statement. If HE is in me, I am capable of and empowered to love as He loves/loved. If I think otherwise, I profess God's words to be false.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, allow me to add a little perspective. Personally, I do not have this agape-style love mastered (Philippians 3:12-16). I know this love is true and available to me, and therefore, it is the standard to which we should live by and strive for. Holding ourselves accountable to the evidence of agape-style love (Jesus love), "dying daily to self," and submitting to the power of God's Spirit in us will move us incrementally closer each day to being the people that God has destined us to be. I have an example and evidence for this claim from the life of Jesus' friend Peter.

> *15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love (Agapeo) Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (Phileo) You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." 16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love (Agapeo) Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (Phileo) You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love (Phileo) Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love (Phileo) Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love (Phileo) You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep.* **John 21:15-17**

I realize there has been much written and taught with regard to this passage of scripture and it is not my intent to get into the exposition or exegesis of this discourse at this time. Suffice it to say that there is a dialogue between Peter and Jesus that is similar to the dialogue that occurs between us (me) and Jesus. Jesus says, Peter do you Agape Me? Peter answers with our rationale; *"Lord, I Phileo You."*

Translation: Lord, I am incapable of loving perfectly. I am imperfect and therefore cannot love you with the standard you set and in the fashion you ask me. I can; however, love you with an imperfect human love. Human love is a love born out of convenience. Human love allows for my failures as well as my best interests (as determined by me). Human love considers the feelings of my "self."

We must consider where Peter's heart was (and is) at this time. I think we can surmise that he (Peter) had recently been angered with Jesus, felt betrayed by Jesus, was frustrated by Jesus, and misunderstood Jesus along with a number of other emotions and feelings. When I consider these elements I think; "yeah, phileo love matches up with what Peter was capable of giving to Jesus." Phileo (human love) makes allowances for the things that Agape (LOVE) is not:

<u>Love is not or does not</u>…
Envy
Boastful
Proud
Rude
Self-seeking
Easily Angered
Keep Wrong-doings
Delight in Evil

If you are reading this, I'm reasonably sure you know more of this story and I hope you know (or at least have an idea) where I'm going next. The end of John's Gospel account of Jesus' life does not complete the story. The life of the apostles continues with the Book of Acts. The promised baptism with fire of Jesus' Holy Spirit comes and empowers the apostles for service and filling them with God's Spirit and Love (Agape). Through the next years and continuing saga of the early church we see the followers of Jesus growing in grace and practice of agape love. Do they get it right every single time? I don't think so; however, I see them living in submission to one another falling back on agape love rather than leaning into phileo love. I think this is evidenced very clearly in one of the last recorded letters from Peter here:

> **<u>2 Peter 1:3-11</u>**
> ***3*** *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.* ***4*** *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.* ***5*** *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;* ***6*** *and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;* ***7*** *and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.* ***8*** *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ***9*** *But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.* ***10*** *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,* ***11*** *and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

These are some incredible claims that Peter is making, and I believe if he were given the same questions asked by Jesus earlier, he would answer "of course I AGAPE You, Jesus!" And this, without the least hesitation. Look at the incredible claims Peter makes in vss 3-4. **"His divine power has *<u>given us everything we need</u>* for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."** And then… **"Through these *<u>he has given us his very great and precious promises</u>*, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."** Absolutely mind-boggling!

Next, Peter goes on to describe the process which follows the promise and empowerment of God's Love (Agape). This next piece is important; agape love doesn't just *happen*. We are willing (or not willing) partners with God in the process. I know there are people that would disagree with this doctrinally, but for the life of me I cannot understand these next directions from Peter in any other way. He writes and directs as follows:

> ***For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

These are instructions directed toward us, providing insight on our responsibility for the nurture of the faith, hope, and love that God has given and put into us. If we are reluctant to practice these instructions, the alternative is implied in the last sentence…we will be ineffective and unproductive "followers" of Jesus and limited in our knowledge of Him (check out the thoughts from this post).

So…this post turned out much longer than I originally planned and I'm not really done yet, but I think I'll continue in the next go around. What is the summary for today? We are supposed to love with God-style (AGAPE) love. We cannot rationalize our own inability to love in this fashion. God has given us all we need to accomplish it. Claiming to be His follower without acknowledging His promises makes Him to be a liar. This, I think, is very dangerous thinking. Consider the words of this exceedingly long post and weigh in with your own thoughts if you want. The discussion is not over. More thoughts are on the way ☺

Post #4

What's Love Got To Do With It?

The last post ended with a summary statement (my position) in agreement that followers of Jesus are commanded to love with agape love. I have also concluded that despite physical evidence in the contrary, if we are "filled" with God's Holy Spirit, there is empowerment and provision to live out to the fullest a life evidenced with agape love.

> **"His divine power has *given us everything we need* for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."** And then… **"Through these *he has given us his very great and precious promises*, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."** (1 Peter 1:3-4)

I'm going to share some thoughts today regarding my position on love; this time with attention given to comparison and contrast. We've looked at, and hopefully agreed upon, our working definition for agape-style love and it is my plan to use this working definition as the "control" for the remainder of our exploration-examination-observation of this topic. Let me reiterate that I do not profess my observations and my opinions to be 100% conclusive, absolute, or definitive. I also do not claim my statements to be groundbreaking or fresh thinking. I am influenced by reading, my mentors, life conversations, and daily observation. There is a great possibility you may hear something you have heard before (from another source) in my writing and opinion. These are my thoughts and my present position on this topic. My mind is subject to change, but this is where I stand today. I don't feel the evidence supporting my position is tenuous, so I doubt there will be a huge shift in my thinking, but I live "in process." Ok, disclaimer done; feel free to weigh in with your own thoughts.

As mentioned, we've established a control group for this exploration of "love." Agape love is the standard for the Christian (Jesus Follower). While I believe that agape love is what we strive for, I don't want to imply that we may never attain it in this life. If we embrace that thinking, we relegate the teachings of Jesus (and the apostolic letters) as limited or unattainable. Another repercussion if we follow that thinking is the continued allowance for excusing ourselves from accountability to agape love. At its most basic level the thinking resembles this thought; *"Agape love is God-love and perfect in every sense. I am imperfect and subject to sin; I am a work in progress/process and prone to failure and consequently I may never attain the ability to love agape-style. Therefore, I live forgiven and excused, looking forward to 'perfect love' in some other existence."*

The other love I want to compare and contrast in this installment is ***phileo***. My understanding (limited as it may be) of the Greek uses of love, places the definition and/or use of phileo as androgynous or amoral. It is, or can be, neutral. It can be good and might be bad. I think the determining factor in phileo love is the human wildcard. We should look at some examples. Let us go back to the chapter of love from 1 Corinthians.

> *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [3] If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.* (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

What is the apostle saying in these words? My paraphrase may not be completely accurate, but this is what I hear in these words:

> *People may think I'm eloquent, a really gifted speaker and conversationalist who can captivate an audience and hold their interest for hours. I may even have multiple educational degrees and heaps of letters following my name…heck, I may even be in big demand for national conferences, but if I don't live with God-love (Agape love) I'm nothing more than hot-air and loud noise… Or suppose that I am able to expound upon the mysteries of God's word and share insight from scripture that tickles the ear and heart of every listener…and my learning has received accolades; yes, I'm published too and sit atop the national bestseller lists… And suppose that I have huge, unwavering, earth-moving faith, the kind that not only moves mountains, but sees sick bodies healed and dead men raised… well, none of that matters. Really, none of my abilities or achievements means anything regardless and no matter my experience, ability, achievement or intelligence, if my love (phileo) is not transformed into the greater love (agape); yes, God-love, then it all means nothing. Or maybe I'm a doer. Yeah, I'm all about righting injustices and super-active on the social front…I go to Africa and dig wells, Russia to work in orphanages, volunteer in AIDS hospices, and serve domestically in the inner-cities to feed, clothe, and give shelter to the homeless and disenfranchised. I am even willing to give up my life, so others might live…universal justice means this much to me, but without God-love (agape) I have no reward and while it may mean something to those who benefit directly from my actions, it means nothing in the economy of eternity. Agape = everything and Phileo = nothing."* (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 *The Borden Special Paraphrased Dynamic Translation*)

I believe Paul describes *Phileo* in this discourse. Most (if not all) of what is described in these few sentences is good, but Paul concludes that it is nothing without God-love. What is the point? Phileo love is imperfect, and in a fallen world no matter how "good" it may look, phileo love at its <u>very</u> <u>best</u> falls short of the mark.

While I go through life looking, listening, and taking mental notes, I notice incongruity or what I think is incongruity. I must speak from my own perspective here. I am basing my next comments on what I witness inside the family of those

calling themselves Christians. Incongruity? Oh yes… Most Christians profess to have "Jesus living inside them." This is a euphemism for accepting, acknowledging, and receiving the salvific redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Some people may even equate "Jesus living inside them/their heart" as being "filled with the Holy Spirit;" the Holy Spirit…the Third Person of the Trinity, a member of the Triune Godhead…living, dwelling, in the heart of men. Incongruous? I don't think it has to be, but let me share my observations. (Before I go further, I must confess my own weaknesses and shortcomings. Because I observe incongruity does not equate to my attainment of perfection. I am not perfect. I fall short; by God's grace, I press on to grow in knowledge and make every effort to practice love Agape-style). Incongruity; oh yes…enough with the qualifying you say? Listen; ***"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever!"*** If love is patient and kind…why are we snarky and impatient? Maybe we don't exhibit our impatience with one another (inside the Christian family) openly, but do we privately in our inner thoughts? How about our patience and kindness with those outside of our immediate "church family," are we patient and kind with them? Love does not demand its own way…neither do Christians. It has been my experience that the equivalent version of Christians demanding their own way is to (a) leave the church (b) exercise some version of "silent treatment" or (c) undertake some type of slander and/or gossip campaign. Love is not irritable and keeps no record of being wronged…why then do we have so many "Christians" struggling with issues of unforgiveness and emotions that are so easily offended? Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance…why then, do Christians suffer almost the same percentage of failed marriages…why is our faith shaken when tragedy looms…why are their church splits and "Christians" abandoning the faith over "disagreements" and "differences?" The answer, I believe, is that we are operating under false premise. We, the Church, assume our operations are undergirded with **agape love**, but the evidence of our history reads more accurately as **phileo love**.

I found a small comparative chart (I don't remember where, but it is not my own work) that I thought illustrated the differences between "earthly love" and "godly love."

Some contrasts between agape and phileo are as follows:

Phileo	Agape
Natural	Learned
Emotional	Volitional
Discriminatory	Non-discriminatory
Conditional	Unconditional
Pleasure	Preciousness
Delight	Esteem
Liking	Prizing
Because of	In spite of
Fails	Never fails

Phileo love can do many "good" things; it is capable of motivating people to do marvelously kind works, create beautiful and timeless works of art, and sometimes incredible acts of selflessness. However, phileo love will still find it difficult to forgive under some circumstances. Phileo love may allow for breaking points in a person where they "must find me time." Phileo love will sometimes feel the "need to be heard." Occasionally, phileo love may feel wronged, slighted or underappreciated. Phileo love will fail…evidenced by spouses "falling out of love" with one another. Interestingly enough, this list resembles what we see in many of the dramas we follow in the media and on TV…and sadly, in our churches too. This is where I come back to the point made earlier regarding my mention of incongruity. Agape love as defined by our 1 Corinthians passage does not resemble in the slightest this phileo love. Is my conclusion that Christians do not exhibit phileo love? Not in the least; we Christians are also sinners saved by grace and we too suffer from the frailties of the physical man. We are weakened by emotional and physical stresses of life…we crack…we break; I know I do. Once more, I must stress that I'm not pushing perfection (although I believe that is the goal and what we should strive for). I am simply putting it out there that our failure to love as Christ loved should be the exception rather than the rule. We should not be so quick to accept defeat or excuse our shortcomings.

I need to bring this post to a close… What do I suspect as the problem and what do I propose as the solution?

The problem: We have not renounced sin or our former self. Oh, we give this verb al-intellectual affirmation, but we have not really done so within our heart. Let us examine this portion of scripture from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians:

> *For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.* ***So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves****. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses. When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.* (Galatians 5:14-21)

The solution: Die to self. Crucify self. Be born again. Follow the way of Jesus. More from Galatians:

> *"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!* ***Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there****. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives."* (Galatians 5:22-25)

There are those in our church circles that say that living in perfect love is impossible on this side of heaven. If that is so, it makes the teaching of the Bible to be a lie. It is no wonder that the world mocks our duplicity. I'm reminded of a jab thrown by the apostle Paul toward the Roman Jews; "*You know what he (GOD) wants; you know what is right because you have been taught his law. You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind and a light for people who are lost in darkness. You think you can instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God. For you are certain that God's law gives you complete knowledge and truth. Well then, if you teach others, why don't you teach yourself? You tell others not to steal, but do you steal? You say it is wrong to commit adultery, but do you commit adultery? You condemn*

idolatry, but do you use items stolen from pagan temples? You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonor God by breaking it. No wonder the Scriptures say, "The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you." (**Romans 2:18-24**)

Can we live congruent with the teachings of our Lord? I think so…I believe it with all my heart. I think about this God-love and the way of living that comes with it…I know it is difficult in the sense of being "pressed from every side." I have one question though in the midst of the difficulty of incorporating this agape love and the reality of living it…

Which is more difficult; for me to believe that a dead man can be raised to life, or that my self-centered heart could be changed to love without condition?

In Part 5 we'll take a look at the repercussions and consequences of not living in agape love.

Post #5

What's Love Got To Do With It?

In recent posts we have discussed the command to "love" as Jesus loved; this defined love is "agape love." I think a distinction has been made between this "agape-style" love which is commanded by Jesus and the alternative love "phileo-love" which is the best form of love humanity can give sans the power of God, the "Christ-in-you" life. With the established definition and the distinction made between the two primary loves mentioned in the New Testament writings, we asked the question whether or not it was possible to live in the capacity and exhibition of "agape-style" love. Scripture teaching from the words of Jesus (in the gospels) and subsequent teaching from the apostolic letters seems to not only affirm the possibility, but assumes the follower of Jesus ***will*** transcend the boundaries of phileo love and begin to love with God-love…agape love. In our last post we noted some of the challenges that are faced and the obstacles (self) that block the way of agape love; today we will examine what scripture teaches regarding "believers" who fail to love agape-style, so we ask; "Are there repercussions and consequences for failing to love agape-style?

As we start to answer our question, let us begin with a premise. I don't think this premise is taken out of context, nor do I think it is an extrapolation "reaching for something" that is not there. We need to go back to a commandment from Jesus in the Gospel of John; *"I give you a new commandment, that you **love** one another. Just as I have **loved** you, you also should **love** one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have **love** for one another."* (John 13:34-35) Four mentions of love; each mention is agape-style love. I think there are some inferences connected to someone professing to be a disciple (follower) of Jesus. Inference number one is fellowship. I don't think discipleship happens in a void; there must be a certain amount and degree of fellowship between the "disciple-er" and "disciple-ee." To remain a disciple, there is also the inference of obedience. I do not believe there could be continued relationship between disciple and "disciple-er" if there existed continued rebellion and disobedience. The very act of disobedience is an oxymoron in context with this style of relationship. Why are these clarifications and premises relevant?

If we fail to live and love AGAPE-style, yet claim to be a disciple of Jesus…we live a lie and exist in a realm of spiritual darkness. Truth does not exist in us, and regardless of what we ***want to believe***, we do not truly know GOD; at least not the Triune God. Let us examine the letter from John (1 John).

> *"So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin."* (1 John 1:6-7)

And…

> *"If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did. Dear friends, I am not writing a new commandment for you; rather it is an old one you have had from the very beginning. This old commandment-- to* ***love*** *(agape) one another-- is the same message you heard before."* (1 John 2:4-7)

These are very strong words directed toward the person still living in the clutches of "self" and making excuses for themselves to not live in the love of Jesus Christ. I believe this "self" is the single greatest challenge to "walking in the light" of Christ. As long as we "look out for number one," we will fail to follow *THE* **ONE**. Our interests and what "seems right" to us are also condemned by John here:

> *"Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world."* (1 John 2:15-16)

Jesus was the author of John's thinking; we can recall His words here:

> *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Matthew 16:25-26)

I read these verses of scripture and fail to find an alternative interpretation other than literal...I believe they are meant to speak to us exactly what has been written; regardless of the translation and/or cultural factors involved. The only way around the bluntness of these words is to claim they really do not mean what they say. From my reading perch, I am unable to justify that latter interpretation. I believe the verses really mean what they say; so where does that leave us? I believe the solution is salvation. I do not believe that we can be saved unless we are born again; *"I tell you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again"* (Jesus – John 3:3). Unless we are "born again" we cannot know Jesus…we might *know of him*, but we do not know Him. It may seem as though I have embarked on a rabbit-chasing tangent; I assure you I have not. Our discussion involves our ability or inability to love as Christ loves. Our failure to love as Christ loves is directly related to failure to truly know Him. I realize how judgmental my words sound, but again…I'm drawing on scripture to help me make sense of discontinuity I see in the arena of the church today. We claim being filled with His Holy Spirit, we claim to know Jesus, we claim to "love" our brothers and sisters in Christ's love, but the evidence does not support our claim. Jesus said, "A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit." Consequently, we must take into consideration the works in the wake of our faith. Let us make a quick count of some issues currently besieging the church:

- Stress related physical ailments (depression, obesity, eating disorders)
- Moral relativism
- Broken marriages (moral failures / infidelity)
- Denominational bickering and church splits
- Drug, alcohol, and chemical dependencies
- Financial ruin (massive consumer debt)
- Gossip, slander, rumor-mongering
- Improper sleep/rest habits

"…A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit." What kind of tree produces the fruit in the above list? Understand that I am not referring to people who are awakening to the call of our Lord from their

existing problems. I realize that we are all "in progress" at some stage or another in our journey. I am speaking directly with regard to those of us who have extended time along the path of our faith journey. The implication or inference is that we are not connected to the vine, and therefore incapable of producing fruit.

> *"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:4-5)

Jesus, speaking these words, forces self-examination and the question; "am I (are we) connected in Him?" The "bad fruit" we bear (generally speaking) cannot come from a "good tree." I think (if we are honest with ourselves) visible evidence supports the conclusion that many of us who profess Christian faith are really not connected to Him at all. I realize that sounds incredibly harsh, but it is not meant that way at all. Perhaps the scope of my observation is too narrow and I may not be portraying an accurate picture at all, but I really do not think that to be the case although I will concede the possibility.

I mentioned the purpose of this post was to explore the repercussions and consequences of the life apart from Agape Love. I know my thinking may have veered a little from time to time as I worked toward making a point. My motivation is concern for the body that calls themselves the "church." Maybe my interpretation of scripture is bent toward the conservative camp, but even allowing a healthy dose of generosity in the translation of Jesus' words I have to ask what exactly did Jesus mean when he said the way is narrow and few find it (Matthew 7:13-14). How many are few? How narrow is the gate or way? Why did Jesus make this point? Let's say we disqualify this statement entirely from this particular narrative account. We still have another harsh statement to deal with that follows it. Jesus begins talking about good trees and bad trees again along with the "fruit" they bear. His discourse culminates with these words:

> "So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'" (Matthew 7:19-23)

What will turn this scenario around? How can we avert this??? We must die to self, destroying the propensity to live phileo love. Be reborn and imbued with the empowerment and capacity live in agape love. The rebirth connects us to the Vine and life-giving-agape of Jesus. See here:

> *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels-- a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity. Anyone who wants to be my disciple must follow me, because my servants must be where I am. And the Father will honor anyone who serves me."* (John 12:24-26)

Recommended meditations:

- John 15
- 1 John 3

What is my summary for this post and meditation? Fruit for God is directly proportional to agape love and agape love is only possible to live if we die to self and become reborn in Him (Christ Jesus). The evidence of that rebirth is manifest visibly with inward and outward acts of love (see the Letter of James). Jesus exhorted us to examine the fruit born from

the trees in His garden…we are they. What fruit do I bear? Does He *know* me? The consequence and repercussion of a "loveless" (agape) life is separation from Him. We are not His if we do not love as He loves. We have no excuses. We cannot claim human frailness; it will not fly as a possibility. God proclaims His power is more than enough to overcome any challenge that stands in our way in His mission. The only destroyer of our hope is us…the sin of self is our saboteur.

Next: *We love (agape) because Christ is IN us…We do not love (agape) because He is NOT in us.*