

Agape the Key to Gods Presence, Part 2**Peter Kreeft**

Agape will also lead to sanctity and obedience, for if we love God we will want to obey Him. In fact, only the power of love enables us to give up our will to His. Agape will also lead to justice and true love of neighbor, for agape is "love in action:" not "love in dreams." Love will produce its own appropriate deeds. Not that a subjective motive is enough, but good motives and good works are inseparable. Good trees produce good fruit.

Agape will even lead to heavenly understanding. Those who love God most will understand Him most in heaven. In fact, that is true even on earth. Simple saints are wiser than sophisticated theologians (though it's possible to be both). Simple lovers know what nuanced scholars do not.

Finally, agape will also lead to the one thing everyone seeks: happiness. Not a temporary, shallow happiness, but one that lasts. Dante reveals the hiding place of true peace: "In His will, our peace." That means agape, for agape is willing God's will. This "yes" is the secret of worship, understanding, sanctity, justice, contemplation, happiness and peace. This is the one "pearl of great price" worth selling everything in the world to get. Only it's free.

Listen to poor families that have become rich. They always say the same thing: The best years were the struggling years, because then we had more love. The exchange of even a little love for even a lot of worldly goods is the most foolish exchange we can make. "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?"

Agape is simple; that's what makes it difficult. It's not too complex for us; we are too complex for it. We must learn to become like little children. God is a little child: utterly simple and pure of heart. That's how He can govern the whole universe: from the center. And that's how we must govern our lives.

Here at last, in I Corinthians 13:4-6, is what "agape" is.

Paul doesn't give us the kind of definition a philosopher would want. Instead, he describes it. He gives us 15 concrete attributes of agape. They tell us what it does. This is what scientists call an "operational definition" -the most practical kind.

We'll never be able to own anything that does not eventually wear out and get boring. But we can give something that never ends and never bores: agape. It's the gift of self. Heaven won't be boring, not because we will get forever but because we will give forever. Living forever without giving forever is not heaven but hell.

Affection sooner or later becomes cloying. Eros eventually becomes a drug requiring ever-increasing doses of excess to ward off boredom. And even friendship finds a rock to founder on, for though its sea is immense, it has shores.

But St. Paul announces something utterly new when he tells us, in three simple and astonishing words, "Agape never ends" (I Cor.13:7). "Luv" ends, but love never ends. "I shall love you forever" usually means about two weeks, because the human heart is fickle. Only agape's promises are not broken. Only God's kind of love endures.

One day everything will be made of agape. All those things that you made of agape in this world will last, and be in heaven; but nothing else. In fact, the only thing that will not be burned up in the world's Last Judgment is the one thing stronger than the fire of destruction: the fire of creation. For love is the fire of creation; God created sheerly out of love. just as the only way to control a passion is by a stronger passion; just as the only way to conquer evil love is by a stronger good love; so the only way to endure the world's final fires is not by any water that tries to put it out, but by the only fire that is stronger still: agape, the very fire of God's being. Only love is stronger than death.

Even the spiritual gifts fail, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13:8: "As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." (This is the charismatic "gift of knowledge:" not knowledge itself; of course there will be knowledge in heaven .) The spiritual gifts are for time. Agape is for eternity. The spiritual gifts are like a placenta, and agape is the baby. Even spiritual gifts are finite and imperfect (verse 9). Everything in this world is imperfect.

But wait. That's wrong. Not everything. A messenger from another world, a perfect world, is here among us. That messenger is the only perfect thing in human experience. That's what Paul tells us in verse 10: Agape is perfect! "When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away." Agape's perfection is a prophet of doom for the imperfect. When the baby is born, the placenta is no longer needed, drops off and dies.

We must die to our spiritual childhood, to our physical childhood. Jesus does not tell us to remain little children, but to become children: new kinds of children, adult children. The Holy Spirit urges us forward to birth and newness. Christianity is the most progressive, the most forward-looking idea that has ever entered the mind of man. How it ever got the "bad press" of being stagnant, retrogressive or "conservative" is a mystery. It must be that Satan knew that the Big Lie will work where the little lie will not. The knowledge we now have, even by revelation and faith and the spiritual gifts, is compared to the knowledge we will have in heaven as a pinhead to a galaxy.

And agape endures all things because Jesus does. Everything suffered by each cell of His Body which is what we are is suffered by Him. This is no fancy symbolism or myth or "spiritual meaning": This is literally true. Jesus Christ experiences everything that you

experience, the least of your joys, the greatest of your sorrows. It is never you alone who suffer or laugh. "Behold, I am with you always." Did you think that was empty rhetoric? Moreover, whatever we make our brothers and sisters endure, we make Him endure, because He is agape incarnate and agape "endures all things."

C.S. Lewis ends the greatest sermon I have ever read outside the Bible, "The Weight of Glory," with this insight: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses," for in both Christ is truly hidden. Though He is hidden, agape still can see:

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption which you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit immortal horrors or everlasting splendors"

And that leads us to Paul's capstone: the eternal destiny of agape.

The deeper we look, the closer we approach Ecclesiastes' terrifying truth about this world: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

In fact, Pascal says, "Anyone who does not see the vanity of this world must be very vain indeed." In other words, nothing here "under the sun" can wholly win our hearts.

But God can, and God is love (*agape*). And love is right here under the sun.

"Agape" love is eternal because it's the very stuff of which God is made, just as sunbeams are the very stuff of the sun. That's why it is the only thing in life that never gets boring.

Even other loves get boring. Selfish loves get boring because if I love you to fill up my needs, then I am eventually filled, and bored. Or else I'm not filled, and therefore frustrated. In neither case can I be happy. There is no possible escape from the dilemma of boredom vs. frustration within the framework of egotism. Only the breaking of that framework by agape can ever solve the problem. Only agape can ever make us happy forever.

We've tried everything else, and every one of our billions of experiments with life has failed. Yet so incredible is our foolishness we keep trying, hoping that the next wife or husband or job or vacation or dose of drugs will bring us the inner peace we long for. That's why today's psychiatric couches and divorce courts are filled.

All 15 features are things we deeply desire. But only agape has them. Take, for instance, the first: How can we get patience? Despite good intentions, we find ourselves continually losing patience even with those we love most. The natural loves, valuable as they are, are not enough. They are like a garden, but they need a gardener. That is the role of agape: it perfects the other loves. When we have agape toward someone, it becomes not only possible but natural to be patient with them, for "agape is patient."

Try being patient without agape. It just doesn't work. It works only as long as you feel patient. So you try substituting hard willpower for soft feeling: "I'll be patient with so-and-so if it kills me" and it almost does. You discover (1) that your will is ridiculously weak, and (2) that even when you succeed in repressing your impatience, it's still there, and your "love" is cold and formal. Patience has to come from the heart, not from feelings or "iron resolution." The heart the center that's the ballpark where agape plays.

Agape is the catalyst not only for other virtues, like patience, but also for other loves, like affection. When we have agape we find that we can begin liking the people we used to dislike. If this seems impossible, reflect that you do it to yourself all the time. You love yourself even when you do not like yourself; and the more you love yourself, the more you like yourself. All you have to do is to apply this love of self to your neighbors. In other words, exactly as Jesus said, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

If you follow this vast crowd of false prophets who dominate our age, you will, quite simply, lose your soul. A recent poll revealed that of all the sciences, psychology has the lowest percentage of religious believers. (Astrophysics and theoretical neurology were among the highest.) But if you let your will die and be replaced by a love that does not insist on its own way, you'll find yourself reborn. Give up what you think is yourself and you will find what God designed as yourself.

The modern West affirms both self and selfishness. The traditional East denies both. The common premise of both philosophies is that the two must always go together. Christ comes with a sword and divides selfishness from self, sin from sinner. We must love sinners passionately, as the East does not. But we must hate sin passionately, as the modern West does not.

Jesus kills the cancer by nailing it to the cross; and the patient survives because there is Resurrection. He exchanges selves with us: We are in Him, crucified; He is in us, sanctifying. He is the love that "does not insist on its own way." That love can be in us only because He is in us. We attain it not by trying a little harder, but by faith, by letting Him invade us and possess us.

Finally, what does Paul mean by saying that agape bears, believes, hopes and endures all things?

Jesus does this. He is agape incarnate. He bears all things, like Atlas bearing the world on his shoulders. He does not only bear His own cross, He bears the crosses of the whole world. He bears His cross to the world and He bears the world to His cross. They meet, the patient and the cure, on Calvary's operating table.

Agape believes and hopes all things because Jesus' faith and hope are as infinite as His charity. Jesus always believes in us more than we do in ourselves. Look how God believed in Job even when Job hardly believed in God or himself any more.



For the Week of May, 2019 – 2019

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8:00 A.M. – Wednesday May 29

All Donors and Benefactors of St. Ann Church & in Memory of:

Parishioners of St. Ann, Mrs. Jennings

8:00 A.M. Thursday May 30

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Parishioners of St. Ann, Rev. Alex Gaudet, Geri Rhodes

8:00 A.M. Friday May 31

All Donors and Benefactors of St. Ann Church & in Memory of:

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4:00 P.M. Saturday, June 1

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10:00A.M. - Sunday, June 2

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SUNDAY 8:00A.M.	Patsy, Bert Tim, Mona	Doug, Hayes	Caleb, Lucas	Jesse, Paula, Peggy
10:00A.M.	Leroy, Paula, David, Melissa	Ariel, Lisa	Zack, Bailey, Gavin, Cole	Kenneth, Joseph

