

What is love?

By Edward Kurath

We talk a lot about love, but what exactly is it? We fall in love and out of love. We love our children, we love our car, and we love sports. We love a certain movie, or we love to sleep in on Saturday morning. Alcoholics love alcohol, chocoholics love chocolate.

Our culture is very confused about what love is. As it turns out, the English word “love” is a very fuzzy word. There are several kinds of love, but we only have one word available to refer to all the types. Selfless love brings healing and life, and Hollywood type love means lust and use and abuse.

We sometimes seek for love in all the wrong places. Why do abused women stay with the abuser? They love them. Why do children constantly pursue abusive parents? They need their love.

God is love (1 John 4:8), and yet this attribute of God can't be what is wounding and destroying these people. God only brings life and healing.

God's Love Is Essential

God is love. His kind of love is real love (**I will call it "authentic love"**), and it is essential to our wellbeing. He wants to pour out His love upon us. In fact, we can only love Him because He first loved us. And yet for some reason God has made us in such a way that we must receive some of His love through another human being.

We need God's love so badly that when our supply of it gets too low, we must try to find other sources, and we may be impelled to accept inappropriate substitutes. God's love is the one essential that keeps us from going down a path of death and destruction. Before we were filled with His Spirit, we were all suffering death and were being destroyed, which is why God sent Jesus to redeem us.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).¹

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2, underlining is mine)

Without His Love We Become Wounded

As children start out in life they are incredibly vulnerable to wounding if not given “authentic love.” There must be a continual infilling of love from both father and mother. The flow of love

¹ "death" and "destruction" are harsh words, but the Bible uses these words regularly to describe our status before we believed in Jesus, and were therefore then without the love of God dwelling in us. A few additional scriptures are:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. . . in this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. . . There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love (1 John 3:14; 4:9; 4:18, underlining is mine).

All scripture references are from the New King James Version, © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

must be from their parents to the child, not the other way around. When children do not receive this love on a continual basis, they desperately seek it. If they are unable to get their parents to give them what they need, they will surely judge themselves as being unlovable. They begin to believe there is something wrong with them.

Without God's kind of love, we become wounded and needy.

Whenever we are not filled to the brim with “authentic love,” we are miserable and desperately seek something to make us feel better. If we have never received much of it, we don't really know what “authentic love” is like, and so we latch onto anything that seems to make us feel less miserable. We are willing to accept substitutes. In fact we may think that the substitutes are as good as it gets. A teenage girl who becomes sexually promiscuous is seeking love. The attention of the boys seems to help her emptiness. But it never really works because it isn't really love. The flow is actually in the wrong direction, because the boys are using her to get their own needs met, not giving to her. They are actually draining her further.

You have a gauging system inside that tells you when you need more water. If you have plenty of water in your body, you aren't thirsty. If I would then offer you a dirty glass of water, you would say, “No thank you,” because you don't need any water. You know that the dirty water might make you sick, and you are in a position to be particular. However, if you are out in the desert for three days without water, and if you saw that I had a dirty glass of water, you would do anything to get to drink it. You are then so needy you will accept a substitute for good clean water.

You have a similar gauging system that tells when you need more of the God type of love, and a similar dynamic happens. If you are filled with plenty of “authentic love,” you aren't needy and you will be very particular about what you accept. However, if you are empty and desperate for “authentic love,” you will be susceptible to accept inappropriate substitutes. These substitutes are actually destructive to you, because they drain life from you instead of filling you.

A Problem

What is the “authentic love” that will meet our needs? In Scripture this is a difficult question to answer. In most discussions of love in the New Testament, *agpao* is characterized as God's kind of love, and *phileo* as man's kind of love. If this is true, obviously *agapao* is superior to *phileo*, and this is often how it is taught.

However, it isn't that simple:

John 3:16 says: *For God so loved [agapao] the world that He gave His only begotten son.*”

This sounds good and strong.

However, John 3:19 says: *And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved [agapao] darkness rather than light.*

Oops!

Is it possible that men could love darkness with God's kind of love? Of course not. It is true that over 90% of the occurrences of *agapao* in the New Testament do refer to a good thing, but that doesn't erase the remaining 9% of the Scriptures that are referring to something that is "bad." Clearly, then, *agapao* cannot simply mean God's kind of love. If not, then what is it? Theologians have wrestled with this problem since the time of Christ.

In the New Testament, there exists both "good" *agapao* and "bad" *agapao*!

Interestingly, *agapao* was a very rare word in Greek prior to the New Testament. Then suddenly it became by far the predominate word for love. Could it be that there is a reason for this? Did Jesus' sacrifice influence the spiritual realm in such a way that something new was now present?

A Possible Solution

I would like to cautiously suggest a possible answer to this puzzle. I present this idea in great humility; because many greater theological minds that have wrestled with this problem.

However, I do have an insight that I have not personally seen in what I have read about this theological debate: through my own struggles, and having had the privilege of counseling many people who struggle with sin, the Lord has opened my eyes to the solution to the problem described in Romans 7:15:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

The solution is in Romans 7:24-25:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Jesus has provided a way by which each believer can begin the process of being transformed into His image. Now there is indeed a new thing for the New Testament writers to talk about. Before the transformation process begins in us, we demonstrate a lot of "bad fruit" in our lives," as described previously in Romans 7:15 above. Here Paul is saying that what I hate comes from some place inside me over which I do not have conscious control. There must be a "root cause" compelling these "bad" behaviors.

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit (Matthew 7:16-18).

If there is "bad fruit" that I can't control, it must come from a "bad tree" somewhere inside me. Any tree is supported and nourished by its roots, so we can say that a "bad tree" has "bad roots." We can also say that a "good tree" is supported by roots of its same kind. Jesus is a "good root." For example:

Rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith (Colossians 2:7).

And on the other hand, a "bad root" causes trouble:

Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled (Hebrews 12:15).

Therefore, as we are gradually transformed into the image of Jesus, the “fruit” (behavior) in our lives gradually changes to be in conformity with His character. This change occurs because Jesus is gradually occupying more and more of our being – He is a “good root” in us, who then produces “good fruit” by His very nature. This transformation was not possible before Jesus sent His Spirit into men at Pentecost.

My guess is that perhaps *agapao* was a rare word in Greek prior to Pentecost because there was no provision for us to have a “good root” planted in us. So there was then little reason to address the fruit from the root – because there was then only the possibility of “bad fruit” from a “bad root.” So there was little to talk about or describe.

However, after Pentecost everything changed. Now there was the possibility of “good fruit” from a “good root” Now there had to be a way to describe love coming from a “good root.” Perhaps the New Testament writers adopted a word that previously was rare, and thus came with little baggage, to describe “fruit” from a “root.” *Agapao* (a verb describing behavior) would fill that need.

If *agapao* (behavior) springs up from Jesus in us, it is “good fruit” – love. Then love is automatically and consistently manifest. After all, love is God’s nature, it covers a multitude of sins, and it fulfills the law (1 Corinthians, Chapter 13).

On the other hand, if there is a “bad root” (a root of sin), it produces sinful compulsions: “bad” *agapao* (behavior).²

It is generally agreed among theologians that the overall description of *agapao* is something like “to esteem, to hold in high regard, to be well-pleased with, to be satisfied with something, to prize, to delight in a thing”³

“Good” *agapao* is “good fruit” from a “good root.”

It would then be possible in John 3:16 for God to highly value us according to this definition of *agapao*. At the same time, according to this broad definition, *agapao* could apply to those in John 3:19 who are in sin, because they highly value and esteem darkness! This possibility solves the problem of *agapao* being able to be used to refer to both “good” and “bad” behaviors. It would also explain why the Apostles used *agapao* to describe “good fruit” 90% of the time, because the message they were trying to explain was that now, in Christ, it was possible to have “good fruit” (“good” *agapao*) from a “good root.” It was “Good News.”

If my theory is true (and I present it very tentatively), then *agapao* (both good and bad) is completely beyond the power of my conscious will power (as Romans 7:15 describes the problem). It is then something that spontaneously springs up from inside us, below our level of consciousness.

This view would be in direct contradiction to what many theologians have speculated: that to love (*agapao*) someone or something is something we have the power to decide to do with our will power.⁴

I think that Romans 7:15 is very problematic to their view.

² For some readers, the very idea of “bad” *agapao* seems obscene. If this is you, please read John 3:19, Luke 6:32, 11:43, John 12:43, 2 Timothy 4:10, 2 Peter 2:15, 1 John 2:15, 3:18. In each of these cases, the word translated as “love” in English, is Greek *agapao*. Read these scriptures in your Bible, and you will see that in each case *agapao* can not possibly be referring to God’s kind of love.

³ This is a composite of the brief descriptions of *agapao* in several lexicons.

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, New Testament, AMG Publishers, © 1992; Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *A critical Lexicon and Concordance*, © 1908.

If I am correct, the only way to move from demonstrating “bad” *agapao* (behavior) to demonstrating “good” *agapao* is to be transformed into the image of Jesus. By the fruit the tree is known. The book of James majors on this topic, as does the book of 1 John. For example:
But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him (1 John 2:5).

What About *Phileo*?

Phileo, the other word for “love” that is common in the New Testament, is used to refer to both a “good” thing and a “bad” thing. In fact, it is often used interchangeably with *agapao*, though not in every circumstance.

“Furthermore, (when) God’s love to man is spoken of, both *agapao* and *phileo* are used. It is difficult to find any significance in the pattern of these words’ usages. Some scholars, having drawn hard and fast differences between the words, have imposed those differences upon various texts of Scripture and thereby produced strained and awkward interpretations. Only on occasion do these words bear particular meanings distinct from one another” (Zodhiates, page 1445).

God Is The Only Source of “Authentic Love”

God is ultimately the only source of “authentic love.” *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . . (Galatians. 5:22).*⁵ God gives it to us through His Spirit abiding in us, and this “good root” produces good fruit - we are truly loving and giving.

If we receive “authentic love” from another person, it is because that person has a full reservoir of it. Somehow they have received a bountiful supply, and it overflows to us. No person can be a source of “authentic love.” Anything we crank up out of our own resources is tainted with sin, is not the real thing, and will therefore not bless another person.

For instance, if we find out that the Bible says we are to love others, we may try to do so. But when we are “trying,” our motives are impure. We may be doing it because we are afraid God will be unhappy with us if we don’t. Or we may try to do it to appear spiritual. Or we may try to do it to be accepted, or to feel important.

The flaw is that in each of these cases we are using the other person to meet our own needs. The counterfeits of God’s love all have this fatal flaw: the flow is in the wrong direction. The person we are “trying” to love has a sensor inside them that knows whether they are receiving the “authentic love,” or if they are being used and sucked dry. The other person would in fact be better off if we weren’t there “trying” to love them.

Unfortunately, when we have never received “authentic love” we don’t have access to the information from our own love sensor. When we were a child, since we were always empty, our love sensor was constantly sounding the alarm. This didn’t feel good, so we had to find a way to silence this bad feeling. We tried to ignore it, and eventually we shut it off completely. Now as adults, because we can’t hear our love sensor anymore, we don’t consciously know when the other person is sucking us dry instead of filling us; so we allow them to do this to us. And, since we are in fact empty inside, we are subconsciously impelled to go around trying to get our tank filled up from others. We then begin to suck them dry!

**Out of my
emptiness I take
from others.**

**Out of my fullness I
give to them.**

⁵ Note that *agape*, which appears in this scripture, is the noun form of the verb *agapao*.

Further Wounding Results

When we have lost the ability to tell “authentic love” from counterfeits, we can make huge mistakes. When we have not received lots of “authentic love,” we can be susceptible to becoming enmeshed in destructive relationships and organizations. When this is our history, we are then looking to have our tank filled, and aren’t very adept at telling the difference between the authentic and counterfeits.

If we haven't received a wealth of “authentic love,” we are vulnerable to abuse and further wounding.

Gangs are attractive to wounded youths. Gang members typically come from very non-nurturing homes. They are looking for a place to belong, and they find acceptance and affiliation in the gang. But they are actually being used by the leader of the gang to fill his own unmet needs for power and control. The members are so powerfully drawn in to get their needs met that they will do anything to retain membership, including committing crimes and exposing themselves to injury or death.

You may recall the tragedy with the Jim Jones commune. To start with Jim Jones was a Bible believing pastor who had a way of drawing people to himself. The members’ needs to belong eventually led them to leave all they had to move to the jungles of Ghana with the group, and eventually to suicide. This charismatic leader mutated into an abusive tyrant. Yet, despite his control and harshness, the people stayed with him because of their need for love.

Our need for “authentic love” is so great that people will suffer abuse rather than do without it. They will even die for a counterfeit, because they are desperate. Tragically, they don’t know that what they are receiving isn’t “authentic love,” and won’t really fill their emptiness.

These are just a couple of examples, but the world is full of abusive organizations. They are abusive because the members and the leaders are all trying to get their own love tanks filled at the expense of the others. It is very possible they don’t consciously realize what they are doing, because they are impelled by unconscious forces to do this. The counterfeit love, which is sin, opens the door to evil, and the people get wounded rather than nurtured.

“Authentic Love” Is “Good Fruit”

This can seem very discouraging. If I can’t love others by setting my own will to do it, how can I possibly obey God? After all, he tells us over and over to love one another. Therefore the question isn’t whether we are to love others, but rather how we can.

We can’t love others rightly, but God can do it through us. When we have been transformed into the image of Jesus, “good” *agapeo* flows from us to others.

We do need to set a goal of being able to love with God’s kind of love, but this will only come about as we are changed into the image of Jesus. Trying hard to love will not enable us to give this “authentic love.”

How to Love

Then, in a practical way, how do you truly love others? The answer, as we have seen, is that it must come from Jesus dwelling inside. If you are not feeling love or compassion for another person, there is a “bad root” of some kind in the way. So the answer is not to try harder, but to

seek the “bad root” and bring Jesus into that place. This will probably entail forgiving that person (or others who have hurt you) and being forgiven by the Lord. With some people you may need to do this over and over again. You will know you have accomplished forgiveness when you find yourself feeling towards that person the way Jesus feels about them.

Our love must be “good fruit” from a “good root” (*agapao*). 1 John Chapter 4 makes it clear that we can only love others because of His presence dwelling in us.

1 John, Chapter 4:

9. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. 10. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. 13. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit . . . 17. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. 19. We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:9-13, 17-19).

<u>Verse</u>	<u>Root</u>	<u>Fruit</u>
9.	God sent His Son	We live through Him
10.	God loved us	We love Him
11.	God loved us	We ought to love one another
12.	God abides in us	We love one another
13.	He gave us His Spirit	We abide in Him
17.	His love perfected in us	So are we in this world
19.	He first loved us	We love Him

The message is that the God kind of love comes from God, and there is no other source. We get it from Him and can then pass it on.

Summary

So what is love? “Authentic love” is an attribute of God. We only have it to give if we have first received it from Him. God’s love residing in us gives to others rather than taking from them. “Authentic love” is the life of God in us, and it gives life to those who receive it through us. “Good fruit” (“good” *agapao*) grows from a “good root.” Jesus is the only “good root,” so the only way to increase in love is to continue to be changed into the image of Jesus. Then Jesus will love others through you. Anything else is not of God and tears people down instead of bringing life.

God's love can flow through us as “good fruit” (“good” *agapao*) from a “good root.”