

Introduction

In 1965, Hal David wrote the lyrics and Burt Bacharach composed the music for a song, **"What the World Needs Now."** Most of you, I'm sure, know its refrain: **"What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No not just for some but for everyone."** The Bible uses a word for that love sweet love that the world needs, *agape*, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Center of Ethical Living

We begin with the opening words in our text, **"Owe nothing to anyone except . . ."** What they imply is radical. Think generally of the seven billion people walking around on planet earth. Also think particularly of the people walking around in our personal spheres of influence. I'm talking about the people we know and meet in our day-to-day lives. Please grasp something. You and I owe them. I've heard people say they don't like to be obligated to anyone. That's too bad because all of us are. We're obligated to literally everyone.

Verse 8 reveals how we are, **"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another."** The Greek word translated **"love"** here is *agape*. We owe it to everyone to love them. Ethicists today talk about what they call **"ethical living"** and **"moral motivation."** Paul claims here that loving others is the center of ethical living and morality. Those ethicists would agree. Referring to moral motivation, for instance, ethicist Simon Blackburn writes that **"benevolence or concern for humanity is the indispensable root of it all."** Or ethicist Hilary Putnam writes that **"the irreducible foundation of ethics is *my* immediate recognition, when confronted with a suffering fellow human being, that / have an obligation to do something."**

But it isn't just ethicists. It's the masses as well, regardless of how religious they are or are not. **"What the World Needs Now"** illustrates

what I mean. In 2004, the Songwriter's Hall of Fame called it "**The Towering Song**" and it is. It's one of the most popular and widely used songs in history.

My point is this. Love is the center of ethical living and morality, and almost everyone (Jesus and non-Christians alike) agree it is. But their agreement ends there. The love that Jesus lived and taught, *agape* love, and the love that non-Christians live and teach, what I'm calling *popular* love, are different in two ways.

The Nature of Love

One way is in their nature – in what love is.

Let's go back to our non-Christian ethicists, Simon Blackburn and Hilary Putnam. Notice how they define love: benevolence or concern for humanity (Blackburn) and doing something for a suffering human being (Putnam). A couple I know took a disadvantaged three year-old girl into their home. Her unfit mother signed over guardianship rights to them and they're raising her, at great personal cost. *Popular* love thinks in terms of acts like that one that alleviate suffering. It considers people who do them, therefore, loving.

Observe two things those acts. First, they're extraordinary. The problems or needs are great and the deeds that solve or meet them are big, even heroic. Second, those acts are rare. They occur only occasionally. They aren't a routine or regular part of day-to-day life.

But *agape* love goes far beyond acts like those. It isn't just extraordinary acts on rare occasions. It's ordinary acts all the time as well. And that's the posture we need to take. Dallas Willard explained it well: "**But when Jesus speaks of love as the principle of life it ought to be, he's referring mainly to the posture of *benefiting others in the ordinary relations of ordinary life*. The heroic occasions will then fit in as they come along, but the reverse is not true.**" He was right. *Agape* love is a posture we have of benefiting people in the ordinary relations of ordinary life. We make our every

encounter with people one of goodwill and respect. Goodwill and respect have two sides – a negative and a positive.

Verse 10 reveals the negative side, **“Love does no wrong to a neighbor.”** We don’t speak or act in ways that harm people – that subtract value or richness from their lives. Verse 9 records the Seventh, Sixth, Eighth, and Tenth Commandments, each of which is about a way of harming people. It mentions **“murder,”** for instance, which according to Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22, includes anger. Every time you and I get angry with people, we wound them. We subtract value/richness from their lives. So, we eliminate anger as a way of dealing with people. We make it **“zero anger”** because love does no wrong to a neighbor. That’s the negative side of goodwill and respect.

The positive side is that we do good to a neighbor. We speak and act in ways that help people – that add value/richness to their lives.

Several weeks ago, Jill and I took our grandson Zechariah to his favorite restaurant, McDonalds. I noticed a young woman cleaning tables whose name tag said **“Miriam.”** As we were leaving, a woman was picking her up. I motioned to her and asked, **“Are you Miriam’s mother?”** After she answered that she was, I said: **“If I had had a daughter I would have named her Miriam. It’s my favorite female name. You’ve done her a great service by naming her that.”** She smiled in response and replied, **“Thanks, I appreciate that.”**

There are so many ordinary ways to express goodwill and respect Dietrich Bonhoeffer identifies three of those in his classic book *Life Together: listening, helpfulness* (simple assistance in trifling, external matters), and *proclamation* (sharing truth). To those we can add a host of other actions like smiling, common courtesy, friendliness, complimenting, encouraging, and guarding reputations to name a few.

That then is one way that the *agape* love of Jesus and the *popular* love of non-Christians are different – in nature. *Popular* love is limited to the big deal, the extraordinary acts on rare occasions. But *agape* love isn’t. It includes not just those acts but the ordinary acts in the ordinary

relations of day-to-day life as well.

The Scope of Love

Agape love and *popular* love are different in a second way. It's in their scope – in whom we're to love. In verses 9-10, Paul uses the same word Jesus did in Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:29. It's **"neighbor."** He uses that word because of the idea it conveys. Neighbors are **"near dwellers."** They're those who are with and around us in day-to-day life.

That is a distinctive emphasis of Biblical ethics. Non-Biblical ethics majors in loving **"humanity," "mankind,"** or **"everyone."** But the Biblical ethics of Jesus majors in loving people for whom we can actually do something. They're usually, not always but usually, those with whom we're in contact. Other ethicists and philosophers mention this. But none give it the emphasis that Jesus and His followers do. Mother Teresa, for instance, said: **"In order for love to be genuine, it has to be above all a love for our neighbor. We must love those who nearest to us. It is easy to love those who live far away. It is not always easy to love those who live right next to us."** Her choice of words is instructive. We're to love those who are **"nearest to us"** or **"right next to us"** whether it's family, enemies, or anyone in between.

Take telemarketers, for instance. I think of a man who went **"postal"** on a telemarketer. He told her he was going to burn down her company's building and kill all its employees and their families including her. He was arrested and indicted as a result for making a terrorist threat, a Class D felony. Let's face it. Telemarketers are one of the most castigated groups of people today. They're almost disregarded as deserving of goodwill and respect. I read an article in that regard titled **"Being Mean to Telemarketers: Unethical or Understandable?"** In it, the author asks, **"Having violated the sanctity of our homes, do they deserve anything resembling courteous treatment?"** In light of the word **"neighbor,"** what's the answer? It's **"Yes, they do."** Why? It's because every telemarketer with whom we speak is our **"neighbor."**

Love and the Law

You now know, from what I've said, that *agape* love is distinctive in its nature and scope. In nature, it goes beyond occasional philanthropy to goodwill and respect in the ordinary relations of ordinary life. In scope, it goes beyond mankind generally to our neighbor specifically, which is everyone with whom we have contact in our day-to-day lives.

That's *agape* and it's profoundly affecting. Verses 9 and 10, which address the relation of law and love, teach us how it is. The four commandments in verse 9 define to what the word "**law**" refers. It's God's moral rules – the dos and don'ts of the Bible. Notice what Paul claims in that regard. The law is "**summed up**" in love, verse 9, and "**love is the fulfillment of the law,**" verse 10. He means by that, love is sufficient for the law. But in contrast, the law isn't sufficient for love. It doesn't sum up or fulfill love. I'd explain verses 9 and 10 this way

The law is *contractual*. First, it's closed off to human good that's outside of what it commands us to do or not to do. It doesn't require us to help others or not to harm them in any ways it doesn't mention. Second, it takes outer behavior primarily into account. Inner disposition rarely matters. Legalists, as a result, try to act lovingly without being loving, which is one of life's greatest frustrations and burdens.

In contrast, love is covenantal. First, it's open-ended to human good. It desires and pursues all human good even if it's outside of what the law commands us to do or not to do. It helps others and doesn't harm them in ways the law doesn't mention. Second, it takes inner disposition primarily into account. Inner disposition matters more than outer behavior does. *Agape* isn't just behavioral. It's mental. We think the interests of others are more important than ours are. It's also emotional. We feel compassion for others. And finally, it's volitional. We will the well-being and joy of others over our own. Those three components of course naturally lead to the behavioral component. Those who think, feel, and will lovingly, will automatically act lovingly.

That's the covenantal nature of *agape* and I think you grasp its

implication. Love is first and foremost something we are, not something we do. If we aren't loving, we won't routinely act lovingly. If we are loving, we will. So, let's be loving.

As most of us know though, we can't be that in our own power. In our natural state apart from Jesus, our disposition (how we think, feel, and will) strongly directs us to our good over the good of Him and others. We cannot, therefore, love as Jesus defines it. So, our disposition must be changed.

There's only one way that it can be – through the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit in us. As Paul makes crystal clear in Galatians 5:22, *agape* is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, something He creates in us. So, we apprentice ourselves to Jesus. We make the decision to become like Him. We then carry out that decision by arranging our lives around engaging Him and His kingdom at hand, which I've explained how to do in other sermons. As we do that, we also try to act lovingly. We do the best we can to love in action. The Holy Spirit responds to all those efforts of ours by transforming us. He continually changes our disposition so that we increasingly think, feel, and will lovingly. We then naturally and increasingly act lovingly because we do.

Conclusion

I close with an observation about that. One of our culture's favorite expressions is "**fall in love.**" People say that all the time because they believe it's true. But it isn't. Love isn't something we fall into – that happens by accident or drift. It's something that we purposefully pursue instead. So let's pursue it. Let's arrange our lives around engaging Jesus and His kingdom at hand and try to act lovingly. We'll give the world what it needs most if we do – love sweet love, that is, *agape*.