

## 21. WHAT IS CHARITY?

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1. There seems to be little doubt about what ‘love’ is according to the New Testament:
  - 1.1. The love of God is unique because he gave his life for us when we were his enemies

John 3.<sup>16</sup> “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”.

Romans 5. 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.
  - 1.2. Hence God deserves all our love *unconditionally* and *completely*:

Matthew 22. <sup>34</sup> But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. <sup>35</sup> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.
  - 1.3. This is also why, like God, we have to love others not on the basis of feelings, affinities, choice –we are told to love the ‘neighbor’ that is the person who happens to be there just because he is there:

Luke 10.<sup>25</sup> And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” <sup>27</sup> And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So

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likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> And the next day he took out two denarii<sup>[a]</sup> and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

1.4. Even more so, like God, we have to love our enemies:

Matthew 5.<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

2. This has led to a certain notion of charity, or *agape*, which has the following features
  - 2.1. *Selfless*: It seeks the good of the other (enemies included) without expecting anything in return.
  - 2.2. *Unconditional*: It does not depend on the worthiness of the recipient or any specific conditions. It is freely given, irrespective of the actions or qualities of the other person.
  - 2.3. *Not based on feelings and desire*: It is a love that transcends personal needs and desires, focusing on the good of others.
3. This view of *agape* bears some similarity with the notion of *duty* in Kant:
  - 3.1. The foundation of ethics is *duty*.
  - 3.2. Duty arises from rational reflection on moral principles
  - 3.3. We have a moral obligation to act in accordance with these principles.
  - 3.4. Duty does not rely on pleasure, satisfaction, reward, feelings, and desire. Our only motivation for fulfilling duty should be that it is the right thing to do.
4. However, there are some crucial differences between the Kantian notion of duty and this approach to *agape*:
  - 4.1. Duty applies to moral principle which make sense to us (they are *rational*).
  - 4.2. Reason might persuade us that we should be gracious even with our enemies, but not that we should *love* them.
  - 4.3. With regards to the love of God, duty might lead us to be good Christians, faithful worshippers, obedient to God’s commandments, fair with other people – but what we are asked is to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, above everything else.
  - 4.4. Even more radically, as long as ‘love’ is fulfilled because it is perceived as the

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fulfilment of a commandment, it is not the love of the New Testament – if we love out of duty, it is not love.

5. The truth is that most of the time we specialize in caricatures of love or in versions which might be well-intentioned but fall short of what charity entails:
  - 5.1. Love of the enemy often is confined to refraining from retaliation and toleration.
  - 5.2. Charitable activities (like gifts, soup kitchens, feeding the poor) help those in need but leave them in their poverty, disempowered – they can easily become more a form of condescension.
  - 5.3. Our Christian life becomes more the fulfilling of a religious obligation – what is needed to *feel right*, but does not involve the whole of our ‘heart, soul, and mind’.
6. In other words, Christianity specializes in domesticated versions of *agape*.
7. Which should lead us to ask ourselves:
  - 7.1. Is the notion of love as selfless, unconditional, and not based on feelings and desires really what the New Testament calls ‘charity/agape’, that is the divine love?
  - 7.2. Is this even *really* love?
  - 7.3. Is it an accident that this version of love should be so similar to the Kantian notion of duty especially in its downplaying of on pleasure, satisfaction, reward, feelings, and desire?
  - 7.4. The fact that Christian love so easily becomes simply tolerant, ‘charitable’, condescending, righteous might not result from the fact that we miss the real nature of divine love – or rather of what love really is?
8. At one point in the history of theology and spirituality, there has been a tendency to assume that the love described in the New Testament (charity/agape) is the opposite of what we spontaneously think of as love – and for which the Greek word is *eros* – and has these features:
  - 8.1. *Self-Centered*: Love/*eros*
    - i. is driven by desire and a sense of lack or need
    - ii. it seeks gratification and personal fulfilment.
  - 8.2. *Passionate*: it is characterized by passion and intense emotion, can be fiery and consuming, it is tied to the physical or emotional aspects of human relationships.
  - 8.3. *Conditional*: love/*Eros* expects reciprocation.
9. Now, is it really true that *agape* is the opposite of *eros*?
10. We can start by wondering whether the way in which God’s love is described in Scripture falls under the category of the definition of *agape* we saw above, or whether it include also *eros*.

“Eros [...] is the principle description of the love by which God loves human beings. The love by which God loves human beings is *eros*, if

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eros is a love that yearns for union with the other, yearns for the flesh of the other, is make vulnerable and passionate for the other<sup>1</sup>

- 10.1. There is no shortage of passages in the Old Testament in which God's love for his people is described in plainly erotic terms;

Deuteronomy 4:23-24: "Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

Hosea 2: 14 14 "Therefore, behold, I will allure her and lead her to the wilderness, and speak to her tenderly.

Song of Solomon 8.6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the LORD.  
7 Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If a man offered for love  
all the wealth of his house,  
he<sup>c</sup> would be utterly despised.

- 10.2. God yearns so much for union with humanity ("yearns for the flesh") that he took human flesh in the incarnation and gave his flesh to eat in the Eucharist.
- 10.3. God is so passionate in his love for humanity that he makes himself vulnerable to the point of suffering in what significantly is called his 'passion'.
- 10.4. God looks for reciprocity, desires it, this is why he delights in Jesus and wants us to learn from him:

Matthew 3.16 When Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 17. 5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

11. What happens if we look again at what *agape/charity* really is in this light?

12. Let us start with the love of God:

Mark 12. 28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality And The Christian Body*, 225

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love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

- 12.1. This time we can pay attention to the fact that God is claiming not only the whole of our strength and mind, but also our *heart* – that is with a love that includes our passions, feelings, and desire.

John 15. <sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

- 12.2. We are not asked to love in a vacuum, but on the basis of the experience of being loved by God, and abiding in this love, feeding on this love.

- 12.3. And significantly this includes joy, that is *delight*: it is truly divine love only if we rejoice in it.

13. Interestingly in the Gospels the first request by Jesus is not to love him or each other, but just to follow him – and similarly the request of the Father is to listen to him:

- i. In other words we are not expected to love in response to an order, as a duty
- ii. We are supposed first to get acquainted with God, experience his caring, forgiving love for us – and let this love elicit our love in return.

- 13.2. Many passages confirm this:

John 13.34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Philippians 2.2 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

14. In Galatians Paul links love to desire and describes it as something which delights us because in it we find joy and peace:

Galatians 5 <sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy,<sup>[a]</sup> drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do<sup>[e]</sup> such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against

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such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

15. **This helps to understand why love should be at the heart of the Christian faith?**
16. The first answer is that Christianity abhors coercion: we are not supposed to become Christians, believe in God, act rightly because we are told so, or because it is the right thing to do – but because doing so is good, desirable, enjoyable, delightful.
  - 16.1. The whole history of salvation can be described as God making himself known so as to become so desirable that we freely choose to trust him, desire him, and love him in return:

Galatians 5. <sup>1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
  - 16.2. Interestingly the yoke of slavery refers to the law, to duty, and to believing that we our aim is righteousness.
17. The second reason is that God is love – and that we only know him through love:

<sup>1</sup> John 4. <sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.  
[...] <sup>16</sup>So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. <sup>17</sup>By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. <sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup>And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.
18. We only know through love because loves displaces us, sets us in motion, transforms us.
  - 18.1. I can know God only to the extent that I am transformed by love

<sup>1</sup> John 3. <sup>1</sup>See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. <sup>3</sup>And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.
19. In the light of what we have seen so far, we can now ask ourselves whether indeed there a sense in which love is

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- 19.1. *Selfless*: It seeks the good of the other without expecting anything in return.
  - 19.2. *Unconditional*: It does not depend on the worthiness of the recipient or any specific conditions. It is freely given, irrespective of the actions or qualities of the one being love.
20. The answer is yes, but only insofar as *love itself is perceived as a good and desirable*.
21. Interestingly, St Augustine talks about “love of loving”:
- 21.1. To the extent that really we are transformed by God’s love for us
  - 21.2. We see the value in loving first, loving unconditionally – desiring reciprocity (it would not be real love otherwise) but not refusing love when that reciprocity is not possible.
22. Which leads us to the love for the neighbour and the enemy we started with:
- 22.1. It is not an attitude driven by duty
  - 22.2. But by our appreciation of the good, and the joy that exists in embracing love, choosing to love
  - 22.3. And by believing in the transforming power of love.