

Agape (Love)

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God, when we cross the Truth,
give us the awareness to receive it,
the consciousness to recognize it,
the presence to personalize it,
the patience to preserve it,
and the courage and the love to live it.
Amen.

Scripture: Titus 3:4-7 (NLT)

⁴ But—

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, ⁵ he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins,

giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. ⁷ Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

Video: [Agape \(Love\)](#) *The Bible Project*

"Advent Word Series" <https://bibleproject.com/advent-word-series-churches/>

SERMON – Agape (Love)

We just heard these lovely words: *When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us.* Jesus Christ our Savior is not only the Word made flesh, but he's agape made flesh, love made flesh. For God is love. And we're made in the image of the God of love. We're created and wired to love. We can't forget the basics, forget our agape roots, for they run deep. Do you remember what the Great Commandment is? Love. Love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength. The other is like it: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* The Scriptures testify that God has enabled, empowered, and elected us to love—God, neighbor, and ourselves. The two biggest mistakes you could ever make in life? Refuse to love. And to reject love. Christian rock pioneer Larry Norman sang in one of his classics, "Without love—you ain't nothin'." But the good news of Christmas is this—in Christ we've got love. You are somebody. Thomas Aquinas said there are two crucial things to believe as a Christian: God exists and that we are loved in Christ Jesus.

God's love is a gift. We can't earn it and we're not entitled to it. The Apostle John reminds us how wonderful this is, "Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us!" God's grace is amazing and God's love is amazing. God is our First Love—we love because God loved us first. And God's love is unconditional, unending, steadfast. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," Paul says.

Another crucial aspect of God's love is that it is sacrificial. For God so loved the world, that he gave. God suffers for us and suffers with us. His love enters into our lives—expressed most clearly in Christ Jesus, who was born for us, died for us, and lives for us. And Christ lives through us and loves through us. "Love one another," says Jesus, "as I have loved you." We're enabled and ennobled to love sacrificially. Because Jesus has some skin in the game, so do we. Agape is a tough and tender kind of love. It has muscle and it has heart. Love is the greatest of all the virtues. Paul tells us the Top Three in 1 Corinthians 13: Faith, Hope, and what? Love. "But the greatest of these is love."

It's God's love that transforms our inner Scrooge and Grinch into a new person, a new creation. In other words, with Jesus we don't have to be a hater, we can be a lover. Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 13, The Love Chapter, that love is patient. It's tender-hearted. Love isn't green with

envy or beet red with anger. Love isn't cocky, or disrespectful, pushy or inflexible. Love isn't cranky and it doesn't hold grudges. It doesn't revel in wrongdoing, rather it rejoices in the truth. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The love of God is indeed a gift as Paul says, but it's also task. We receive love and respond to love. We can't earn God's love—but we need to use it, practice it, share it. The more you give it away, the more you get! We can't grow in love if we're not giving, serving, praying, worshiping, studying the Scriptures, dying to our selfish ways, learning from our mistakes, or stretching ourselves. These spiritual practices open us up and perfectly position us so God's love can seep deep into us and work its way into our living. And usually, it's a trial and error process, a life-long practice to perfect it.

Emily Esfahani Smith in her moving book "The Power of Meaning" tells the true story of Coss Marte who grew up in the 1980s and 90s on New York's Lower East Side. His father was an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. From early on, Coss had entrepreneurial hustle, a knack for getting good grades and making money. His three siblings all ended up working at companies like Goldman Sachs and IBM.

Coss chose a different career path—selling drugs. And I'm not talking about pharmaceutical sales. Coss applied all his business acumen to the drug trade—working his way up the narcotic ladder. Weed, then cocaine and crack. His particular neighborhood started gentrifying, so he adapted and began catering his services to wealthy professionals. By age nineteen he was making 2 million dollars a year. But it didn't take long for "living the dream" to become a living nightmare. In 2009, he and eight of his associates were arrested in a drug bust by the feds—one of the biggest in New York that year. Coss was sentenced to seven years in prison.

After a medical exam in prison, it was discovered that he had high cholesterol and high blood pressure. He had always hated exercise, avoiding it at all costs. The doctors said if he didn't change his habits, he'd have a heart attack before he finished serving his time. So Coss applied his business moxy to his personal fitness. At first the prisoners laughed at him as he struggled to do one pull up. Slowly but surely, he got in shape. Really good shape. He helped other prisoners get in shape too. But there was still this nagging problem. His cardio health had improved. But his heart was still sin sick—that hadn't changed. He continued dealing drugs in prison. And then Coss hit rock bottom. Just before his prison release date, he got in an altercation with a prison guard and found himself in solitary confinement for thirty days. All that he was given in his cell was a pen, paper, and a Bible.

Coss wrote a ten page letter to his parents saying that he messed up and wouldn't be home for a long time. When he finished the letter, he realized that he didn't have any stamps or an envelope to send his letter. As the days of his confinement dragged on, he obsessed about how to get the letter to his family. But one day he received a letter from his sister who was a devout Catholic. She suggested that he read Psalm 91. "Hell no, I'm not reading the Bible, that's a waste of time." But then Coss reconsidered, "All I have is time." So he opened the Bible and flipped to Psalm 91.

"When I opened the Bible a postage stamp fell out of the Bible. I got goose bumps. It was a supernatural moment for me." He read from Psalm 91,

"Those who love me, I will deliver...when they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in their trouble."

The moment changed Coss' life. He read the Bible from cover to cover.

"I realized how much I was messing up. How selling drugs was hurting myself, hurting others, and hurting society. My decisions were impacting my family."

He knew that he wanted to help people, rather than harm them. He vowed never to sell drugs again. He got a new purpose to put all his energy into helping people lead healthier lives by getting into better shape. Coss served another year in prison and was released in 2013. He was starting from scratch. He had lost everything. He was like a newborn baby entering the world in his second birth after prison.

By 2014 Coss opened his own fitness studio on the Lower East Side. He specialized in a prison-style workout that could be done in a cell or a small urban apartment, utilizing almost no equipment, just the human body. He soon had 350 clients. A month later 700 clients. By 2016 he had 5000 clients and could quit his job working at Goodwill. He rebranded his gym as ConBody. Many of his clients were the same people he was selling drugs to. God helped give Coss a purpose and mission—to love and serve others. To help, not harm.

Christmas is a great time for us all to reflect upon the gift of agape love revealed to us in Christ. The year is drawing to a close and a new year is beginning. I want to challenge us to ask ourselves individually and collectively how we can reveal the kindness and love of God more and more. Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Spend time basking in God's love—in prayer, reflection, and Scripture reading. Just be filled up in God's presence—individually and corporately. Then let that love and kindness pour into your relationships.

2. Take stock—how much of my day is dealing with ME? How much mirror time do I clock in? Is my life only about my time, my plans, my needs? Am I harming others or helping them? Pay attention if you often ask: What's in it for me? Do you regularly bail on others when they become too much work, inconvenient, or not meeting my needs?

3. Refuse to see people as: mere producers or means to give us what we want. Do we care only about what they can accomplish for us? Let's see others and ourselves as human beings made in God's image. See them with the eyes of Christ, the eyes of love, giving attention and listening fully.

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4. Practice the spiritual discipline of mutuality—giving and receiving. Giving gifts and receiving gifts. Give with no strings attached. Be humble enough to receive. Join in that to and fro, give and take of love. Enjoy the gift and the task, The freedom and the responsibility of loving God, loving others, loving ourselves wholeheartedly.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Agape (Love)" by The Bible Project

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