

MEANING:

How Do We Love Our Enemies?

By: Claude Lewis
Philadelphia Inquirer

In one of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most compelling Christmas sermons, he spoke with precision and at length about the meaning of the word "agape."



Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s

Ah-gah-pay. It's one of the Greek words for "love"; it's in the dictionary.

Agape, he said, persuades us that no matter what we may feel about another person or how we oppose his or her beliefs, there must be an acknowledgment that what ties us together is greater than what separates us.

King framed this subject in the biblical injunction that all of us should "love our enemies."

Some people regard this command in literal terms. In doing so, they distort its real meaning. "Love your enemies" initially appears to be impossibly utopian or hopelessly sentimental.

King said that the order to love your enemies does not mean you have to like them. Nor does it mean that opponents are no longer at odds. Nobody can command us to like what we do not like, for emotions cannot be altered by moral laws. The law may not bring a man to be educated, but through the law his behavior can be regulated. "While nobody can make a man love me," King said, "most men can be persuaded by such laws not to lynch me."

Agape has the power to elevate us as human beings. It enables us to see past our differences and recognize the inherent value of everyone.

Agape shows us that even those we despise often have some redeeming value, if we are willing to search for it. It is the personhood of our enemies that unites us in something higher and greater than both of us. Our respect for the common ground of human existence must take precedence over our likes and beliefs. This is a difficult lesson for even religious institutions to absorb.

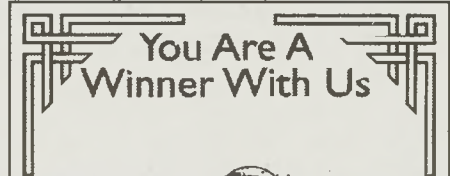
Some mistakenly imagine that if we could love our enemies, we might become friends with them. Sometimes, this is not necessary or even possible. Often, enemies remain enemies—but agape would lead us to treat our enemy as many prizefighters do in an athletic contest, instead of as many soldiers do in a fierce battle. Agape has a power of its own.

Once, while I was talking with Muhammad Ali after one of his fights against Joe Frazier, Ali winked at me and said: "Man, Joe Frazier is tough. He must have gone down to the country to get some of those shots he threw at me." This was agape at work. It was Ali's recognition of his enemy's ability and his contribution to the elevation of their common ground.

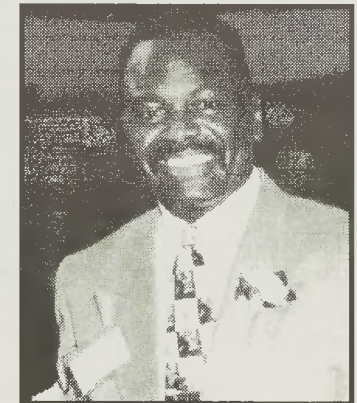
During a press conference at the height of the civil-rights movement, King was asked if he hated George Wallace. "Of course not," King said. "I respect him greatly. If it were not for Gov. Wallace, the world might never have heard of Martin Luther King, Jr. His positions on issues made mine better. So in a real sense, George Wallace helped me to reach many of my goals. It never occurred to me to hate him or anyone else."

He explained that this was the kind of spirit Jesus urged on us—never utopian or sentimental, but a spirit realistic and yet loving. What matters is to be fair. Most of us are fair only to the extent of having some minor disagreements with them. But there's not much merit in that. The real test is to be fair even to our enemies, especially to our enemies. This is an act of will, not sentimentality or intellectual conviction. It is this kind of behavior that elevates us and makes us better human beings.

King's sermon often filled me with the Christmas spirit. I don't celebrate the holiday the way most people do, but I enjoy the warm feelings expressed at this time of the year. I live with the hope that such feelings will be extended all year long, so that when we wish others a happy new year, we mean it—and keep it going all 12 months of the calendar.



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