

MARK & FRIENDS PROGRAM RESOURCES

A Love to Live By

Rediscovering Agape Love in Scripture and Everyday Relationships

Dr. Winfred Neely

Thursday, August 6, 2026

Program Summary

In this Thursday edition of Mark & Friends, host Donna Leland welcomes Dr. Winfred Neely for a thoughtful conversation about agape love. Drawing from years of ministry, missionary service, marriage, pastoral work, and biblical teaching, Dr. Neely explains that agape is love that gives, serves, and sacrifices for the highest good and kingdom flourishing of another without demanding anything in return. The discussion explores how this love is empowered by the Holy Spirit, how believers can love difficult people with wisdom and boundaries, and how a revival of agape love could renew the church and awaken a watching world.

Key Takeaways

- Agape takes its meaning from God because Scripture uses the word to reveal the character and action of God's love.
- A working definition of agape is love that gives, serves, and sacrifices for another person's highest good and kingdom flourishing without demanding repayment.
- Agape does not grow naturally in the human heart; it is produced and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Loving without reciprocity can be painful, but believers can bring that hurt to God and receive strength to continue faithfully.
- God loved us while we were still sinners, and His persistent love becomes both the model and motivation for loving others.
- Faith and hope will one day give way to sight and fulfillment, but love will continue throughout eternity.
- A revival of agape love in the church could lead to spiritual renewal, repentance, unity, and a powerful Gospel witness.
- Agape is not passive enabling. Biblical love can establish wise boundaries and refuse to participate in another person's dysfunction or sin.
- Before responding to a difficult person, believers should ask what the most excellent, loving, and discerning response would be.
- Intergenerational Christian community gives believers access to wisdom, patience, and experience as they learn how to love well over time.

Scripture References

- 1 John 4:7-12
- Romans 5:8
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
- Philippians 1:9-11
- John 13:34-35
- Galatians 5:22-23
- Ephesians 4:1-3
- Colossians 3:12-14
- 1 Peter 4:8
- Luke 6:27-36

Quote of the Day

“Agape love is love that gives, serves, and sacrifices for the highest good and kingdom flourishing of the other without looking for anything in return.”

Broadcast Notes

Donna Leland opens by asking Dr. Winfred Neely why agape love has occupied his attention for so many years. He traces the beginning of that journey to missionary service in Senegal, West Africa, where a study of 1 John awakened him to God's call for the church and for individual believers to practice self-giving love. Dr. Neely explains that the Holy Spirit took up the Greek word agape and used it to communicate the unique love of God. He emphasizes that this love does not arise naturally from human strength, but must be planted and empowered by the Spirit. The conversation then turns to the pain of loving without receiving love in return. Dr. Neely encourages believers to move toward others in obedience while taking disappointment and hurt to God in prayer. He points to God's love for sinners and to 1 Corinthians 13 as the foundation for a renewed church. The final portion of the discussion addresses difficult relationships, discerning love, healthy boundaries, the danger of enabling, and the need for wisdom from older and younger believers alike. Dr. Neely also introduces his Moody Publishers book, *A Love to Live By: Rediscovering Agape Love in Scripture*.

Practical Applications

- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal one relationship where your love has become conditional, transactional, or dependent on repayment.
- Choose one practical act of service that benefits another person without drawing attention to yourself or expecting recognition.
- When love is not returned, bring the disappointment honestly to God rather than allowing bitterness to harden your heart.
- Before a difficult family gathering or conversation, pray through Philippians 1:9-11 and ask for love shaped by knowledge and discernment.
- Decide in advance what loving boundaries may be necessary so that kindness does not become participation in dysfunction or abuse.
- Refuse to answer insult with insult. Ask what response would most faithfully reflect the mind and heart of Jesus.
- Reach out to a relative, friend, or church member you have treated politely but not intentionally loved.
- Invite a mature believer from another generation to help you think through a difficult relationship with wisdom and patience.
- Examine whether your church community is known primarily for its positions, programs, or the unmistakable practice of agape love.
- Pray specifically for revival and renewal of self-giving love in your own heart, marriage, family, congregation, and community.

Today's Challenge

Identify one person you find difficult to love. Before your next interaction, write down three questions: What is this person's highest good? What response would honor God? What boundary, if any, would be both loving and wise? Pray for the Holy Spirit's help, then take one concrete step of agape love without demanding a particular response.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for loving us while we were still sinners and for never giving up on us. We confess that our love is often conditional, self-protective, and dependent on what others give back. Fill us with Your Spirit and teach us to give, serve, and sacrifice for the highest good of others. Give us wisdom and discernment with difficult people, courage to establish loving boundaries, and grace to keep our hearts free from bitterness. Renew Your church through a revival of agape love, and let the world see Jesus through the way we care for one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

About Today's Speaker

Dr. Winfred Neely

Pastor, Bible Teacher, and Moody Bible Institute Professor

Dr. Winfred Neely is a pastor, Bible teacher, author, and longtime member of the faculty at Moody Bible Institute. His ministry experience includes missionary service in Senegal, West Africa, where his study of 1 John helped deepen his understanding of God's call to agape love. Through years of pastoral ministry, teaching, marriage, and discipleship, Dr. Neely has explored how Spirit-empowered love transforms individuals, families, churches, and communities. He is the author of *A Love to Live By: Rediscovering Agape Love in Scripture*, published by Moody Publishers.

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Mark & Friends Welcome Song

We're glad you're here, we're glad you're here,
Fellowship is sweeter, knowing you're near.
It's so good to see you, we hope that it's clear,
Everyone loves you, we're glad you're here.

We're glad you're here. We're glad you're here. Fellowship is sweeter, knowing you're near.

It's so good to see you. We hope that it's clear. Everyone loves you.

We're glad you're here. Welcome to Mark & Friends. I'm your host, Donna Leland.

So glad you could join us today. We're going to be talking about the idea of agape love. We've heard it in sermons seemingly forever.

We know it means God's love. But today, Winfred Neely from the Moody Bible Institute. He has been a pastor and teacher there for many, many years.

He's going to be sharing with us his thoughts concerning agape love, God's love. Welcome, Dr. Neely to Mark & Friends. Well, Donna Leland, thank you so very, very much for having me.

I think this may be the first time that I've actually been on the air with you. I think it is. Your wonderful legacy has gone before you.

And now we get a chance to chat and to connect. Let's think about this. Why did you pick this whole topic of agape to help the body of Christ understand it in a deeper way? I have been thinking about this topic for many, many years now.

I have, by the grace of God, wanted to live it out. And so it actually grew out of my ministry of the word of God through the years. I was a missionary in Senegal, West Africa, and I was doing a series of studies on First John.

And I came across that section of scripture that deals with why we should love one another. And that was the beginning of my journey in earnest into God's call on the church corporately and to me individually to practice agape love. So this is the genesis of was my study of the scripture.

And I was able just to see the power in life transformation of the practice of agape that took place in my own life and my own marriage and then how I related to people. And this is a thing that flows throughout the Bible and in particular, the New Testament. So it's really central to Christian living.

So those were some of the, it's kind of the base, the origin, the genesis of God putting this in my heart to communicate to his people. Well, if we're going to practice it, we better know what it is. So give us a working definition.

What is agape love? What are we looking at? Well, agape love takes its meaning from God. The term agape was used in classical Greek, but it really didn't have a really a definitive meaning. There were other words that were more precise in Greek language.

But the spirit of God takes up agape to use it to describe, to communicate the love of God. So it's God himself who gives meaning to agape and not agape giving meaning to God. It's its use of the love of God.

Hence, it's the strongest term for love in the Bible because it's used for God's love. So in short, a quick, well, I don't want to say a quick definition, but a working definition is agape love is love that gives. It's love that serves and loves that sacrifices for the highest good and kingdom flourishing of the other without looking for anything in return.

Although agape love will give birth to love and others, but its goal is focused on serving, giving and sacrificing for the highest good and kingdom flourishing of the other. See right there and expecting nothing in return. I mean, right there, it was just like a gut punch because that is the kind of love that only God can give.

You know, in my own flesh, I'm not, I'm not able to do that in Donna's flesh. So it has to be an external love given, empowered to us by God. Wow.

I mean, just to move through my day, loving people and not expecting anything in return. I don't know. How does that work out? Well, I mean, you're right, Donna, when you say that we cannot do this in our own strength.

Agape love does not grow naturally in the soil of the human heart. This is an implant from the spirit of God himself who allows, who empowers us and who enables us to say yes to the Holy Spirit and to move out in love toward other people. It is, and this is why it's so powerful because we don't do this naturally.

Right. The spirit of the living God is calling us to love other people. I feel like that really is the crux of the issue in all relationships that go bad is that, you know, we do things for other people and they don't do it in return because we're expecting a payback.

How do we move away from that, expecting that payback and then being disappointed when we don't get it? Well, you know, it's hard. It is hard. It's hard.

And here is the thing. There is, there may be and often is pain in loving other people because the love is not reciprocated. It's not returned.

And in some instances, it may even take years before a person would even admit or acknowledge. I want to thank you for the love you expressed me when I was in that bad place. Sometimes that takes a long time.

That takes a long time to happen. I think it was one counselor calls love moving toward the other without self-protection. And we're not talking about abuse here.

We're not talking about becoming a doormat for abuse. What we are saying is that we move out and love toward the other and the power of the spirit because this is what God is calling us to do. It is fundamentally, it is fundamentally our relationship and fellowship with God that's central to this.

And so in order to, I want to, we want to walk with him. We want to obey him. We want to serve him.

And he's calling us to serve others. So in obedience to God, we step out in faith. And when we are hurt in the process, someone is still intransigent.

Someone is still unkind. We take that to God in prayer. We talk to God about that.

And in the process of talking to God about these matters, he listens, but he sympathizes with us. He encourages us and he gives us the strength to carry on. And we become better people in the process of moving out toward others without that self-protection.

Think about how God loved us. He loved us while we were still sinners. I mean, that right there is the motivation for this agape love that we're talking about.

He loved us when we did not love him, but he was consistent. He kept at it and he never gave up. It just to me, thinking about how much God loves me unconditionally, constantly, 24-7, never stopping, is never going to stop loving me.

Then that is my motivation to think about loving other people. That's right. 1 Corinthians 13 says, Now, abide, these are faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.

And it seems to me that love is greater than faith and love is greater than hope. Because, as you noted, love will continue for all eternity. When we see Jesus face-to-face, faith will have given place to sight.

We will see him as he is. When we see Jesus face-to-face, our hope will have been realized. But agape love and the experience of God's love for us and for one another will continue forever.

We will have been in heaven for a billion upon billions of eternities. And love will still be in operation. And this is why it is so vitally important for the church, the body of Christ, to pray and ask God to give us a revival and renewal of agape love.

I am convinced, Donna. I am convinced before the Lord that if there is a revival and renewal of agape love in the power of the Spirit, in the lived experiences of the people of God, we will see a revival in the church and a consequent movement of the Spirit of God, what we call in the revival language, great awakenings among lost people. I believe that we would have a spiritual revolution on our hand if we actually fell on our knees and repented for our lovelessness and rose up in the power of the Spirit to be committed to agape love.

We would see something wonderful happen in our own day. Well, let's just get to it, Dr. Neely. What about the difficult people? I've got a reunion coming up and I need some help here because there's an individual who is going to show up and she is going to give it to me.

And she just, you know, zeroes in on me and pokes me and she's going to be saying some stuff that she just wants a reaction. And it is so much fun, actually, to not give it to her and just to keep steady. And it's kind of almost a challenge.

So, yeah, but I want to go beyond just that and I want to love her. And so help us love difficult people, people that are actually out to get us and really are in complete opposition to everything we believe. That is going to require wisdom.

Yeah. You know, I have a chapter, I think it's next to the last chapter of the book, A Love to Live By. I've got discerning love.

And I saved that chapter for the next to the last chapter because I thought I would end there after we've had a significant discussion about agape love in various sections of Scripture. To get to the point where we understand, OK, but we do need to exercise love in ways that are wise, ways and wise and discerning. That may mean that we may have to establish some boundaries.

Yeah. You know, and I say it because, you know, Paul says here in Philippians chapter one, verse nine. And this I pray that your love, your agape love may overflow still more and more.

Listen to this in real knowledge and all discernment so that you may discover the things that are excellent. In other words, we ask ourselves before God in prayer and guided by the knowledge of God's word and discernment. What is the most excellent response that I can give to this difficult person in love? So we think we think about that.

OK, we may have to let people know as lovingly as we possibly can. I love you. I appreciate you, but I'm not going to stand here and allow you to insult me because I care that much about you.

And I walk you walk away from that because sometimes we enable people because we think that's the loving thing to do. And I want to suggest that

enabling someone else's dysfunction, enabling someone else's sin is really not the loving thing to do. It's the easy thing to do.

The loving thing to do is to establish boundaries. And one of the things, Donna, that as you say, you are not going to respond in kind. Well, that's the loving thing to do.

We're just we're just not going to get down there in the mud with people. And I was early in the book. I was in five guys.

I tell the story about this, this issue of love and the spirit of God brought back to my mind some relatives in my family that I needed to love. Now, I was courteous to them. I was kind to them.

I would greet them when we were in the same space at family events, so forth and so on. But the spirit of God reminded me that I had not loved them in the agape sense of the idea. And that may involve just calling them, checking up on them, seeing how they're doing.

They may not be that excited about the fact that I am calling, but that's not the issue. The issue is I love and I care and I'm reaching out for you in love. And, you know, so we've got to know.

And listen, I get it. I get it. And there's some people, frankly, some relatives, we just do not want to be around.

But, you know, we ask God to give us grace and help and strength to navigate those relationships in ways that are helpful. I encourage people to be prayed up before events like that. You know, to give it some careful thought and forethought about how I can handle myself in a way that honors God.

That verse from Philippians is just gold in all wisdom and discernment. And that might look very different to different people. You know, other people, it might be acting one way and then another.

It could be another, you know, depending on the spirit of the living God. It's kind of exciting again to just say, Holy Spirit, show me how this person needs to be loved. And the neat thing is he can tell us special stuff that maybe that person doesn't even know.

And he can give us creative ways to love them in that energy to give them the call. You know, maybe the call that we give them will be at that right moment to remind them God loves them. And isn't that what this whole agape is all about is reminding them God loves them.

Just using us. He's just using our mouth and our phone call to remind them that he loves them. People need to be convinced of the love of God.

They do need to be convinced of that love. And it's very humbling and yet sobering for us to consider that the instruments that God will employ to remind people in our sphere of influence that he loves them is us. Yes.

You know, that's humbling. But I again, it's as we as we grow in the faith and as we mature in Christ. Hopefully our expressions of agape love will become more mature and more accurate expressions of the mind and heart of God.

As we grow in Christ and as we think through the best ways to to show love to people. And it takes a community. We need one another.

I think this is one of the benefits of the intergenerational church where we have people of various ages in the congregation with various levels of experience. And we can come alongside and help one another in determining what is the most effective way to show love in these circumstances. This is why we need we need one another in the church.

It is working together. We need each other. And as we're doing that for others, reminding ourselves, we have to agape one another, don't we? We can help one another.

Now that older person too may not have the same physical or emotional bandwidth of a 30 year old, but they may have something that that 30 year old that does not have that years of life experience. Yeah. And we can tap into that and get some wisdom about how do I show love in these circumstances?

Sometimes we need older people to tell us, you know, when parents are raising kids at home to say to a parent, now you realize that your child's brain is not going to be completed forming until they're about 25 or 26.

So there are some things in life that they are not going to understand, even though you love them. Give it some time, because it's not a microwave approach to life transformation. It takes time, years and consistency on your part.

Right. And hopefully one of these days, that person who has experienced your love will come around and at least at least come back and say that I'm sorry. And I've seen that happen.

I've seen that happen where some of these kids have literally walked away from Jesus. They grew up in loving homes where their parents actually, not perfectly, but consistently put in practice agape love toward their children. And they walked away from God.

They walked away from Jesus. And some of them have returned to the Lord and are doing quite well in ministry because the spirit of God used the life, the godly life of those parents to convict those children and bring them back to himself. But sometimes it takes it takes time.

We're talking with Dr. Winfred Neely, and he has just written a book by Moody Publishers, and it's called A Love to Live By, Rediscovering Agape Love in Scripture. Thank you so much, Dr. Neely, for joining us on Mark & Friends. Well, thank you so very much, Donna.

I hope we do it again. And thank you, dear listener, for being a part of Mark & Friends. Coming up tomorrow, it's Mark and his many friends.

They've gathered in the studios, and we're going to get a great Bible study, as always. It's Friday's edition of Mark & Friends. We're a ministry of great news media.

Thank you so much for being a part of our listening and giving family. Have a great day.

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