

John (79) – Greater Love

03/01/2026

Scripture 1: (Jn. 15:13-15 ESV)

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Sermon:

Previously, I said that, “The best and most loving thing someone can do for, or do towards, another person (the “good-est”, good work possible) is to share Jesus with them and offer them the hope of the Gospel: the good news about our redemption from sin and judgment, by God's grace, through personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Alone.” and I continue to stand by that assertion, even as Jesus authoritatively declares here, “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*”. I stand by what I have said because sharing Jesus with someone, sharing and testifying to the one who laid down His life for us and them, is truly the greatest, best, and most loving thing that we can do because we could not do what Jesus did for us. Sharing Christ with others, so that they may hear and believe (Romans 10:15), so that they may know about the great salvation of God for them; offering them the hope of forgiveness and life, is the best thing that we may do for them as it remains to the Holy Spirit to help them believe by giving them faith, regenerating their hearts, then to impute and apply Jesus's sacrifice to them.

Thus, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest act of love that we may do. Usually, we may do this by simply talking about Jesus. Other times, we may do this through our actions and activities, by showing and sharing Christ's love in tangible ways; including limited, self-sacrificial or costly ways. But, most rarely and at most, once in a lifetime, the needful opportunity will arise where a person may (or must) echo the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus by sacrificing their life for the life of someone else.

- Such occasions are beautiful moments of testimony, visibly demonstrating a person's faith in Jesus.
- Such occasions become moments for both mourning and rejoicing, when one life is lost while many more lives may be saved.
- Such occasions tend to become memorialized and widely publicized, so much so that their frequency appears be more common than they actually are and, a sense of positive preference for such occasions may seem greater than it truly is.
- While such occasions, when human lives are saved at some great or terrible cost, may become sensationalized, we become alternatively quick to minimize or ignore the greater import and impact of Jesus's sacrifice to save the souls of sinners. We honor the soldier who covers a grenade with his body to save his compatriots. We honor the person hit by a car, while pushing a child out of the way. We honor the bodyguard who “takes a bullet” for the person they are protecting. Countless movies and TV shows use these as plot points. However, they are rarely used as an example of Christian love, since “Western” society and culture, through the past influence of Christianity and Christians, has adopted “self-sacrifice” as a social or civic virtue. Unfortunately, the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice has also been corrupted by Islamic ideology and adopted into their theology so that they now believe that a terminal act of self-sacrifice for the purpose of killing infidels or, for the advancement of Islam, will result in the Muslim being rewarded by Allah in paradise¹; even rewarding them with eternal life for their sacrifice. But, such examples are not necessarily presented as examples of Christian love.

Yet self-sacrifice is a uniquely Christian virtue because of Who we know love to be: the LORD, Jesus Christ; and because of what we know love to be, *agape*, because Jesus showed us how to love. Anyone who has been a Christian for a lengthy period or, anyone who has been around Christians, knows and understands this about love: that the love described by and commanded throughout Scripture, is *agape*: selfless and self-sacrificing. *Agape* does not require a reciprocal return or any return at all. {We don't have to do anything for this love. (a play on Meatloaf's *I would do anything for love, but I won't do that.*)}

1 <https://quran.com/ali-imran/169-174>; <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=9&verse=111&to=118>; <https://al-islam.org/four-californian-lectures-sayid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi/lecture-4-concept-martyrdom-islam>

- *Agape* is the kind of love that God has loved us with: giving and sacrificing His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, for us.
- *Agape* is the kind of love that Jesus loved those around Him with: compassionately healing the sick and injured, raising the dead, and freeing the demonically possessed.
- *Agape* is the kind of love that we should love the LORD with: loving Him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength; loving Him with our whole being; and, loving Him more than we love ourselves.
- *Agape* is the kind of love that we should love one another with, how we are supposed to love our neighbors.

Knowing this, we must inherently recognize that there is a natural hierarchy of “loves”, even within *agape*. Sharing an extra tunic (Luke 3:11); giving something to someone sacrificially, is one tier of *agape*. Getting up early, picking someone up, and then driving them across town (perhaps through a snow storm or other severe form of weather) so that they can make it to work on time, is another tier of *agape*. Meanwhile, Jesus here declared the highest tier of *agape*; declaring what the highest example is immediately before performing it Himself, by telling His disciples that “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*”. Jesus explained that making the ultimate self-sacrifice, sacrificing one's own life, is the greatest expression of *agape* for another person; that there is no greater expression of *agape*, than giving up everything for the preservation, defense, rescue, or survival of someone else.

But, there is an important distinction that is generally overlooked. Jesus qualifies for whom this greatest act of sacrificial love would be made: for one's “*friends*”. The greatest act of exemplary love would not be made for His enemies; nor for His servants or slaves (or employees); nor for a stranger, but for His own friends. Think about that for a moment, and then consider the fullness of its implication.

- Jesus is a “friend” to us, even when we do not act like friends to Him.
- We sing “Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God; he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.” (*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*; Robert Robinson 1758); singing that {Jesus sought us while He was a stranger to us}. Yet we were not strangers to Him, because He had already decided that we are His friends (even when we did not want to be), because the Father had already given us to Him (John 10:29) and because we were already being grafted into His “*vine*”.

Jesus explained, “*No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*”. He explained that they (and we) have been elevated in the status of His estimation and consideration; elevated to a position of effective, social equivalence as His friends, rather than as His subordinates. Thus Jesus added another layer onto our obligation of obedience; adding the layer of “friendship” telling them, “*You are my friends if you do what I command you.*”.

- Our obedience to Christ's commandments is obligatory, by natural right, because He is the Sovereign LORD.
- Our obedience to Christ's commandments is our loving response to the mercy and grace of God that we have already received.
- Our obedience to Christ's commandments is the sign of our friendship with Jesus; our friendship with God; our reciprocation of Christ's friendship towards us.

Now, think about the people whom you consider friends.

- Would you intentionally act against their interest?
- Would you intentionally act to hurt or harm them?
- Would you intentionally act to oppose or thwart their goals, desires, or happiness?
- Could you intentionally do any such thing and honestly, call yourself their friend or expect them to still consider you their friend?
- Could you intentionally walk all over them, treating them like a doormat; treating them as being beneath your notice and still expect the mutuality and communion of friendship with them?

Of course not. Yet how often do we treat those we claim to care about that way? Sadly, that is also how we often treat Jesus. We take Him, His love, and His forgiveness for granted. But when we belong to Christ, when we are united to Jesus Christ, He remains our friend nevertheless: a friend whom we treat terribly; a friend whom we frequently sin against (Psalm 51:4). Do we really, truly, honestly *agape* Jesus as He *agape's* us?

Now, since Jesus has declared and has authoritatively defined what the greatest work of love is, and since we recognize the presence of a natural hierarchy of love, and since this idea has been (relatively recently) brought to the forefront of public awareness by one of our civil leaders (Vice President JD Vance²) mentioning the *Ordo Amoris* in an interview, we should consider what else Jesus actually said about the issue and how both Roman Catholics and we, Reformed Protestants, have interpreted and applied this doctrine to our lives.

When Jesus commanded us “to love”, He was affirming the core Old Testament teachings that we must, “...*love the LORD [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] might.*” (Deut. 6:5 ESV) and that we “...*shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of [our] own people, but [we] shall love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]...*” (Lev. 19:18 ESV) (Matthew 22:36-40); two teachings that plainly carry a natural sense of hierarchy and priority. Even the prompting question that the Pharisee asked Jesus, “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*” (Matt. 22:36 ESV) implied the assumption that some commandments are “greater” or “more important” than others. Since they agreed upon this answer, they also agreed that there must be an ordered priority to love, which Jesus declared to be: God first, our neighbor second, and then ourselves (in a very close, almost second-place) third.

Since Jesus declared that, “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*”, we need to decide whether his example of love is greater than a person's love for God (as Deuteronomy 6:5) or, if it is an equal expression of that same love somehow, because initially, it sounds like a type of {loving our neighbor} or, whether it is intended, in the uniquely specific case of Jesus and His work, to be the ultimate expression of **both**.

- I am inclined to believe that this third option is the most correct and, I think the system of Covenant Theology supports this answer.

Previously, we have spoken at length about the system of Covenant Theology, focusing on two main biblical covenants: the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace; but, we did not examine a third observable (or interpretable) covenant: the Covenant of Redemption; because, although plainly evident, it remains largely theoretical. The Covenant of Redemption predates/precedes both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace in order of establishment, being made “...*before the foundation of the world...*” (Eph. 1:4 ESV) when the Elect were chosen (predestined for salvation) by God the Father and given to God the Son (John 6:39, 10:29, 17:9; Ephesians 1:3-14). We believe that in this pre-temporal and supralapsarian period, the three Persons of the Trinity entered into a covenant with one another.

2 <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/first-love-locally-jd-vance-and-or-do-amoris/>;
<https://x.com/JDVance/status/1885073046400012538?lang=en>

- The Father covenanted with the Son, out of love, to give Him a people to redeem from sin.
- The Son covenanted with the Father to redeem the people whom the Father would give Him, out of love; that He would redeem them by offering Himself as the only all sufficient and perfect sacrifice.
- The Holy Spirit covenanted with the Father and the Son, out of love, to apply this purchased redemption to this chosen and given people.

Holding to this understanding, then we may interpret Jesus's sacrifice of {laying down His life for His friends} as **both** an act of love for God the Father (in perfect obedience) and an act of love for His neighbor (by substituting Himself in the place of His friends). Therefore, this unique event, Jesus's crucifixion, is truly the greatest act and expression of love for God and for neighbor. Therefore, all other loves, all other expressions human of love for either God or neighbor must (logically) be lesser because this act of love is utterly unique and uniquely greater.

Thus, from Jesus's teaching, we may logically interpret the following hierarchy of loves:

- God's love for the elect, “*For God so loved the world...*” (John 3:16).
- The elect person's love for God (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- The elect person's love for their neighbors (Leviticus 19:18).
- The elect person's love for themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

once we grant that our love for God should and must always be our first priority and ourselves as our last, it remains for us to prioritize and order the different degrees of our neighborly love.

Thomas Aquinas, the *Doctor Angelus* (d. 1274) was considered to be the greatest theologian-thinker of the Roman Catholic church. His doctrinal teachings are used as the modern Roman church standard. He outlined in his *Summa Theologiae*³, the *Ordo Amoris*, the “Order of Loves”, that was referenced by Vice President J.D. Vance, back in February 2025, using Scripture, the Apocrypha, and Aristotelian philosophy.

- Aquinas rightly deduced that God should be the highest object of our love (Article 2, 3).
- He deduced that our love of kindred (love for our family) is the highest type of neighborly love (Article 8);
 - within our love for kindred, he deduced that a person's love for their children should be greater than their love for their parents (Article 9, 11);
 - that love for our spouse also should be greater than our love for our parents, yet less than love for our children (Article 9, 11).
- He deduced that love for our fellow citizens should be greater than our love for foreigners or “resident aliens” (Article 8);
 - within our love for our fellow citizens, he deduced that the love we feel towards our beneficiaries is greater than the love we feel towards our benefactors because a benefactor “...incites the recipient to love him: whereas the benefactor loves the recipient, not through being incited by him, but through being moved thereto of his own accord...” (Article 12).
- that love for our fellow “comrades in arms” (our compatriots and allies) should be greater than our love for an opponent or enemy (Article 8).

3 <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3026.htm>

While one might disagree with some of Aquinas' rationalizing (the way and reasons for how he reached his conclusions), or, perhaps disagree with his whole prioritization, it is difficult to disagree with his conclusions on each specific priority pair.

Like Aquinas, Herman Bavinck (d. 1921), an early 20th Century Dutch Reformed theologian, also delineated a priority of neighborly loves, deriving his list from the Reformed view of the Fifth Commandment⁴; prioritizing loves from the lesser to the greater:

- Love towards Those Who Have Died
- Love toward Sinners
- Love toward Enemies
- Love toward Those in Distress
- Love toward Brothers and Sisters [in Christ]
- Love toward Angels (as a civil duty)
- Love toward Animals and Nature in General

Each of these types of “loves” may be identified as being commanded, or commended, in Scripture. It is also more difficult to argue with the whole of Bavinck's order than with Aquinas's; however, this may be since Aquinas parsed closer (or narrower) relationships between persons, while Bavinck remained (more safely) in a more general realm. It is difficult to say whether either ranking is truly wrong or, if one is substantially “more right” than the other, because each list describes different spheres of life from the other. So, we might be better served by considering both lists in concert together, rather than in opposition, as we move towards applying similar degrees of priority to our own good works and spiritual fruits of love.

Knowing that *agape* love is self-sacrificial love, we also understand that Jesus's command for us to {*agape* one another as He has *agape'd* us} does not a command us to prioritize sacrificing of our life for another's. Christians do not aspire to echo or emulate the sacrificial death of Jesus. Unlike Islam, dying for our faith is not the greatest act a Christian may do; it is not to die in service to Christ. Instead, the greatest thing we may do is live for our faith, to live for Jesus Christ and the glory of God because our Savior lives. {We serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today} (*He Lives*, by Presbyterian minister Alfred H. Ackley (b. Spring Hill, PA, 1887; d. Whittier, CA, 1960)) because He is working through us: working through our union with Him; helping us to rightly love others in His Name and for His sake.

However, while we do not intentionally seek out opportunities to die for our faith, we also should not turn away from it, if it becomes necessary over the course of our walk of faith. As we follow Jesus, that is a cross which any Christian could be called upon to bear (Matthew 10:38). So, if that becomes the case, then we should do so gladly and without fear, as countless martyrs and saints have done before us because, being grafted into the “*true vine*” of Christ, we know to whom we belong and we know that we shall be welcomed into the arms of our Savior.

Meanwhile, because of Jesus's example of self-sacrifice, we do need to be willing to *agape* in the extreme. We should be willing to do anything for *agape*, especially when it is something costly or “expensive” for us to do, because we *agape* God by *agape'ing* our neighbors, in all of their degrees. Yet, while we are commanded to {love our neighbor}, and since it is evident that not all neighbors are equal, we must therefore, prioritize (or order) our love for them.

4 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Volume Two* (427-452)

- At the highest tier of loving our neighbor, we should prioritize loving the physical world around us. By *agape*'ing animals and nature; by working (*evad*) and keeping (*shamar*) creation (Genesis 2:15), as partial fulfillment of the Covenant of Works, we are likewise showing *agape* to all our family, to our friends, to our neighbors, to our nation and our fellow citizens because we are helping to preserve what God created and had declared to be “good” for their present and future enjoyment or benefit.
- Next, we ought to prioritize loving our fellow Christians over non-believers. Hearing that verbalized sounds jarring and feels unloving but, prioritizing *agape* for people within the Church (those who belong to Christ) over people outside of the Church (those who belong to Satan and the world) actually conforms to both the letter and the spirit of what Jesus taught.
 - Jesus commanded the disciples, “*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.*” (Jn. 13:34 ESV); telling them to practice *agape* between the disciples and also therefore, believers within the Church.
 - During the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus's use of a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan as examples was not to imply that the priest and Levite were not neighbors (despite failing to act “neighborly”) but to demonstrate that even Samaritans, someone outside of the faith and marginalized in society, should also be considered their neighbor. This was a lesson about inclusion, not exclusion. This parable also highlighted the expectation that we ought to first be loving those who share our faith (which is why the priest and Levite are condemn-able in this parable).
 - When approached by a Canaanite woman seeking His help, Jesus helped her, but after making the point that “*the lost sheep of Israel*” were a higher priority over the Gentiles, as feeding one's children is a higher priority than feeding the dogs (Matthew 15:21-28).
 - Again, Jesus also asked, “*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Matt. 5:46-48 ESV), telling us to be different by loving those who do not love us; to love those who are unrelated to us; to love the outsider, outcast, and foreigner, because everyone loves those who love them in return. Jesus was promoting the inclusion of outsiders into our order of loves, without reducing anyone's existing priority.

So, when it comes to our good works of love and charity, Christians should take care of Christians first, before we take care of others in the world. This same principle is also demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Office of Deacon was established to take care of the Gentile Christian widows who were being neglected and overlooked from receiving charitable support (Acts 6:1-7). Gentile Christian widows were added to their distribution of *agape* along with Jewish Christian widows. The original Deacons were charged to care for widows within the Church, not those outside of the faith. Furthermore, it is right that we should take care of our own before others, because what kind of Christian witness would it be to neglect our own and leave them to suffer, while helping those further away from Christ instead (James 2:16)?

- Within our other spheres of life, outside of the church, it is reasonable for us to prioritize *agape*'ing those in distress or those who have more severe needs over those with lesser needs or those who are not in distress. That is an exercise of wisdom and prudence, *agape*'ing to create the greatest and widest benefit; loving the most neighbors best. It is also not unreasonable for us to prioritize a family member that is in distress over a fellow church member who is in distress, over a stranger in distress. We have a higher obligation to love those closest to us first.
- It probably sounds counter-intuitive to prioritize *agape*'ing our enemies over *agape*'ing “sinners”, but this order of priority is easier to understand when we understand the proper definitions. Bavinck used

the term “sinners” to describe unrepentant and recalcitrant persons who stubbornly refuse to accept the free offer of Christ's grace. Such persons may reasonably be considered as further away from the LORD (generally) than persons whom we might consider as our enemies. While our latent sin nature recoils against *agape*'ing either category, being the hardest type of love for Christians to faithfully practice, choosing to prioritize our enemies over such “sinners” is better stewardship and a better application of our resources because we may expect a better response from an enemy (generally). We have a better hope or a better expectation of seeing an enemy won to Christ than such “sinners”.

- His rationalization for prioritizing “enemies” over “sinners” becomes more reasonable once we also factor in Bavinck's final neighbor category to *agape*: the deceased. We *agape* the deceased out of honor and respect for their base humanity; for the image of God that they bear and the inherent dignity that God's image imparts to them. But the *agape* shown to the deceased is unknowable to them because they are beyond any possible impact of our love; because they are no longer able to respond to our Christian witness with repentance or by turning to Jesus Christ in faith. Yet also, by showing *agape* to the dead, we are witnessing to those who still live (for while life remains, we may hope for a person's redemption). So, in relation to “Enemies” and “Sinners”, *agape* for the deceased would appear to be the least efficient use of our resources and spiritual stewardship, yet it remains a faithful use.

These orders of love, as suggested by Aquinas and Bavinck, were based upon their interpretation of Scripture and their attempt to faithfully apply it to life according to the principles of “good and necessary consequence” (WCF 1.6). But, when it comes to each of us and our own lives, their “orders of priority” are simply helpful suggestions that we may choose to similarly follow, or not. We are each responsible to allow Scripture to inform and instruct our conscience, and then to allow our conscience to guide our lived practice (WCF 21). But, apart from establishing the LORD as our highest priority to love, followed by our “neighbor” and lastly, followed by one's own self Scripture does not provide us with any firmer or more detailed order; everything else is a matter of interpretation. Therefore, while there is no one, single correct way for us to prioritize our neighborly loves (subject to conscience), we may be sure that there are wrong ways to order them. So, it is our responsibility to study and pray, and trust the Holy Spirit and Scripture to guide your conscience.

So, remember that Jesus said, “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” and Jesus has declared us to be His friends (while we are also adopted by God the Father as Jesus's brothers and sisters; and, while we all love our own brothers and sisters, it is much better when we are also friends with them).

- Know and believe that Jesus loves you so much that He laid down His life for you; that He laid down His life to pay the just penalty for your sins.
- Know and believe that Jesus loves you so much that He also took His life up again, rising from the grave to life eternal, so that you, and I, and all who are united to Him as “*branches*” in His “*true vine*” will likewise receive and enjoy life eternal in Heaven with Him (Romans 6:5).
- Know and believe that Jesus loves you so much that He has ascended into heaven, where He presently reigns over both heaven and earth, and where He is presently interceding for you, and me, and all who are united to Him before God our Father.
- Know and believe that Jesus loves you so much that He has asked the Father to send the Holy Spirit to dwell within you, and me, and all who are united to Him, to sanctify us, encourage us in faith, and to help us produce good spiritual fruit for Him and His glory.

AMEN

Appendix 1:

Notes from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*: Second Part of the Second Part, Q 26

Article 8: (Conclusion: *our love of kindred is greatest over all others; our love for fellow citizens is greater than the love of non-citizens [aliens]; our love for comrades [soldiery] is greater than our love for strangers [enemy]*)

- ...we ought out of charity to love those who are more closely united to us more, both because our love for them is more intense, and because there are more reasons for loving them.
 - Accordingly we must say that friendship among blood relations is based upon their connection by natural origin,
 - the friendship of fellow-citizens on their civic fellowship,
 - and the friendship of those who are fighting side by side on the comradeship of battle.
- Wherefore in matters pertaining to nature we should love our kindred most, in matters concerning relations between citizens, we should prefer our fellow-citizens, and on the battlefield our fellow-soldiers.

Article 9: (Conclusion: *Love for children is greater than love for parents*)

- First, because parents love their children as being part of themselves, whereas the father is not part of his son, so that the love of a father for his children, is more like a man's love for himself.
- Secondly, because parents know better that so and so is their child than vice versa.
- Thirdly, because children are nearer to their parents, as being part of them, than their parents are to them to whom they stand in the relation of a principle.
- Fourthly, because parents have loved longer, for the father begins to love his child at once, whereas the child begins to love his father after a lapse of time; and the longer love lasts, the stronger it is

Article 11: (Conclusion: *Love for wife/spouse is greater than love for parents*)

- But on the part of the union, the wife ought to be loved more, because she is united with her husband, as one flesh, according to Matthew 19:6: "Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh." Consequently a man loves his wife more intensely, but his parents with greater reverence.

Article 12: (Conclusion: *Love our beneficiaries more than our benefactors*)

- It is some thing in the benefactor that incites the recipient to love him: whereas the benefactor loves the recipient, not through being incited by him, but through being moved thereto of his own accord: and what we do of our own accord surpasses what we do through another.

Appendix 2:

Order of Loves or *Ordo Amoris*

- The Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father
 - God's love for the Elect
 - God's love for humanity
 - God's love for all creation
 - The Elect person's love for God
- The Elect person's love for our Neighbor

Thomas Aquinas:

- The Elect person's love for their family
 - Children
 - Spouse
 - Parents
 - Other relationship
- The Elect person's love for country
 - Fellow Citizens
 - Fellow Soldiers
 - Resident Aliens
 - Foreigners
 - Enemy Soldiers

Herman Bavinck:

- Love toward Animals and Nature in General
 - Love toward Angels (as a civil duty)
- Love toward Brothers and Sisters [in Christ]
 - Love toward Those in Distress
 - Love toward Enemies
 - Love toward Sinners
- Love towards Those Who Have Died

- The Elect person's love for Themselves