

# Jesus's Agape-Love Model of Psychotherapy and Social Harmony: *Ancient Wisdom That Closely Parallels Modern Evidence-Based Therapies*

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“The [historical] **sources** [evidence] for the life of **Jesus** are ... **better than** those for the life of **Alexander the Great.**” — A. N. Sherwin-White, Oxford. Roman Society & Law in the New Testament.

## What & Why

Jesus of Nazareth is most often approached through the lens of theology, institutional religion, or debates concerning miracles, doctrine, and metaphysics. Yet another perspective deserves serious consideration: Jesus as a profoundly insightful observer of human nature whose teachings and lived example articulated a coherent model of psychological maturity, relational healing, and social harmony. Whether one approaches him as divine, symbolic, prophetic, philosophical, or simply historical, the psychosocial framework at the center of his life and teaching remains strikingly relevant.

This essay is about the core *principles* and concepts in Jesus's psychotherapeutic-social model. It's for everyone, not merely for Christians. Nor is it an attempt to argue for a particular denomination, dogma, or theological system. Rather, it examines a more universal question:

*What model of the human person did Jesus actually present? What vision of emotional maturity, transformation, healing, relationships, and community stands at the center of his teaching?*

The central thesis of this essay is that Jesus's agape-centered framework of human transformation substantially overlaps with many principles now recognized within effective, evidence-based modern psychotherapy. Long before the development of attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology, cognitive therapy, trauma-informed counseling, compassion-focused therapy, or positive psychology, Jesus articulated a remarkably integrated model of healing grounded in relational love, inner transformation, emotional regulation, meaning, humility, forgiveness, and community.

“These things I have spoken to you, so that my **joy** may be in you and your **joy** made **full**. . . . Love each other **as I have loved you**. Greater love has no one than this: to **lay down one's life** for one's friends.” **John 15:11-12** — **JESUS** [bold added]

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ **But I tell you, love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, . . . Be **mature**, therefore, as your heavenly Father is **mature** [in the character of agápē-love].” **Matthew 5:43-48** — **JESUS**

## Agape Love

"**Modern psychology** is calling on us now to **love**. But long before modern psychology came into being, the **world's greatest psychologist** who walked the hills of Galilee told us to love, He looked at people and said: "**Love your enemies**; don't hate anybody!"

— **Dr. Martin Luther-King Jr.**, sermon "Loving Your Enemies" 1957.

At the center of his entire framework stands one foundational concept: **agápē**.

The English word "love" is notoriously vague. A person may say, "I love pizza," "I love my dog," "I love my spouse," or "I love my children enough to die for them." Yet these experiences are profoundly different. Some forms of love are rooted primarily in desire, gratification, or emotional attachment, while others involve sacrifice, loyalty, compassion, service, and willingness to suffer for another's good.

"...whoever wants to **become great** among you must be your **servant**, ... just as I, the Son of Man, did **not** come to **be served**, but to **serve**, and to **give** his life...." Matthew 20:26-28 - JESUS

The ancient Greek term *agápē* became central within early Christianity and referred to this higher form of self-giving love. Its use by Jesus and his first followers was deeply shaped by the Hebrew concepts of *ahavah* and *chesed* found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. *Ahavah* referred broadly to relational love and devotion, while *chesed* carried the richer meaning of steadfast covenant loyalty, compassionate mercy, enduring faithfulness, and self-giving commitment. When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into a Greek version (the Septuagint - LXX) centuries before Jesus, *agápē* became the primary word used to carry these ideas into the wider Mediterranean, Greek speaking communities of trade and commerce.

By the time of Jesus and the early Christian movement, *agápē* had therefore become much more than a Greek word for affection. It described a way of being rooted, grounded in compassionate, faithful, relational concern for others. This is why the early Christians eventually made the radical claim that "God is love" (1st John 4:8). In Jesus's psychotherapeutic and social worldview framework, *agápē* is not merely an emotion or moral command. It is the deepest structure of reality itself.

This understanding is essential because Jesus did not present love as merely one virtue among many. *Agápē* functions as the organizing center of his entire psychosocial model. According to Jesus, the quality of a person's inner life, relationships, emotional health, and social behavior all emerge from whether the individual is moving toward *agápē* or away from it.

## SAMPLE PASSAGES SHOWING AGAPE'S CENTRALITY TO JESUS AND TRUE CHRISTIANITY

"You have **heard** that it was said, '**Love your neighbor**' and '**Hate your enemy.**' But **I tell you, love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, .... Therefore, **you must be perfect** as [God the **Source** of Love] is perfect [*teleios = mature*]."  
**JESUS in Matthew 5:43-48**

**John 3:16** - "God so loved the world (Greek = Cosmos/Creation)"

"A **new** commandment I give you: **Love one another. As I have loved you**, so you also must love one another. **By this** everyone will **know** that you are **My** disciples, **if you love one another.**"  
**JESUS in John 13:34-35**

"This is My **commandment**, that you **love** one another  
**as I have loved** you.  
And I appointed you to go and **bear fruit** [*of love*]..." **JESUS in John 15**

"Teacher, which commandment is the **greatest** in the Law?" **Jesus** declared, "**Love** the Lord your **God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the **first and greatest** commandment. And the **second** is like it: '**Love your neighbor as yourself.**'  
All the **Law** and the Prophets **hang** on these **two** commandments."  
**JESUS in Matthew 22:36-40**

"The **goal** of our teaching is **love** from a pure heart and a clear conscience".  
**1 Timothy 1:15**

"For the **whole law** is fulfilled in **one word**: "You shall **love** your neighbor as yourself....."  
**Galatians 5:14**

"The **fruit** of the Spirit is **love**, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control ....",  
**Galatians 5:22-23**

*In the **above** Galatians passages Greek literally says "one word", even though the command's full sentence about loving your neighbor has seven words in it. And, in the further verses of **Galatians 5 in verses 22-23**, quoted below the GREEK term for fruit is an absolute **singular**, even though nine words are listed. So, it's the first word, **LOVE**, in the list of 9, that is **THE single** fruit of the Spirit. The other 8 words are like the flavors or experiences produced by living agape love.)*

"Let us **love** one another, for **love is from God**, whoever **loves** has been **born of God** and **knows God**.  
Anyone who does **not love** does **not know God**, because **God is love.**"  
**(John the best friend of Jesus in First John 4:7-8)**

*(In light of the above statement that, **God IS love**, it's important to remember that in the OT God self-revealed as **YHWH, (Exodus 3)** a name derived from the Hebrew verb havah meaning **to exist**. So, **YHWH** means "**I EXIST**" or "**I AM**". A title Jesus often ascribed to himself. So, **God exists as love**. This matches God's revelation to Moses in **Exodus 34:6-7** merciful, gracious, **abounding in lovingkindness** ....")*

The **Ten Commandments** are **all about love**.  
The first four on how to **God** and the last six on how to love **others**. **Exodus 20**

"When a **foreigner** resides with you in your land, **you must not oppress him**. You must **treat the foreigner** living among you as native-born and **love him as yourself**, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the I AM your God." **Lev. 19:33-34**

"Owe no one anything, **except to love** each other,  
**for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.**"  
**Romans 13:8**

**Romans 8** - is all about God's love as the fundamental reality of the Cosmos

**1 Cor 12:31** - "I will show you the most excellent way [love]"

**1 Cor 13 ALL** - the famous descriptive chapter of love vs anti-love POEM.

It ends with "faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love"

**1 Cor 14:1** "Pursue love"

**Philippians 4** = Practical steps to apply agape for inner & relational peace

**James 1** = Trials can develop strong, humble, resilient character of love

**James 2:8-13** Law of Love = Law of Liberty

**James 4** Selfishness (lack of love) as one cause of dysfunction

**First & Second John** - Both letters are ALL about love vs. anti-love

**For samples of the practical application of agape, see also -**

Luke 9:23-24; 2 Tim 2:23-26; Mat 11:28-30; Eph 3:14-21; John 7:37-39; 15:1-17; Philippians 4:1-13.

Jesus repeatedly taught that the human "heart" is the source from which life flows. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). In biblical language, the heart did not merely refer to emotions. It referred to the deep inner center of the person: thought, desire, motivation, perception, memory, attachment, volitional intention, and deepest character. In modern psychological language, the concept closely parallels what contemporary therapies describe as core schemas, internalized relational models, emotional conditioning, unconscious motivational patterns, and implicit memory structures.

## **Deep Psychosocial Coherence**

This is one of the many reasons Jesus's teachings often reflect psychosocial sophistication even today. He understood that destructive behavior rarely emerges in isolation. Rather, behavior flows from deeper inner structures. Resentment, greed, domination, envy, hatred, self-righteousness, dishonesty, and cruelty are not random acts disconnected from the self. They arise from distorted internal orientations.

No wonder, then, that despite all our **technological advancements** and the proliferation of **social media, we are more intra- and interpersonally isolated than ever**. Yet it is only when we are known that we are positioned to **become conduits of love**. And it is love that **transforms our minds**, makes forgiveness possible, and **weaves a community** of disparate people into the tapestry of God's family."

— **Christian Psychiatrist Curt Thompson MD**. *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*, p. 3.

Likewise, healing and maturity emerge from internal transformation rather than mere behavioral compliance. Jesus consistently criticized superficial religiosity that focused on outward rule-following while neglecting the inner condition of the person. “You clean the outside of the cup,” he says, “but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence.” In psychological terms, he rejected performative morality disconnected from genuine character transformation.

This emphasis parallels important insights within Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. CBT proposes that emotional suffering and dysfunctional behavior are strongly influenced by maladaptive beliefs, automatic thoughts, distorted interpretations, and deeply rooted cognitive patterns. Jesus repeatedly addressed these same kinds of internal distortions. His teachings on anxiety, judgment, resentment, projection, fear, and self-deception function in ways remarkably similar to modern cognitive restructuring.

In Matthew 6, for example, Jesus directly addresses chronic anxiety. Rather than encouraging denial of suffering or simplistic optimism, he redirects attention away from catastrophic future-oriented rumination. “Consider the birds... consider the lilies...” He focused attention toward present reality rather than obsessive fear about imagined futures — the dreaded “what ifs”. This resembles both cognitive and mindfulness-based therapeutic approaches that seek to interrupt chronic threat fixation and catastrophic thinking.

Likewise, Jesus’s warning about attempting to remove tiny “the speck” from another person’s eye while ignoring “the log” in one’s own eye reflects profound insight into projection and self-deception. Human beings often externalize the very conflicts they refuse to acknowledge within themselves. Modern depth psychology and psychodynamic theory similarly recognize projection, defensive externalization, and lack of self-awareness as central dynamics within human dysfunction.

Yet Jesus’s framework extends beyond cognition alone. His model is deeply relational. Human beings, in his view, do not heal in isolation.

The metaphor of the vine and branches in John 15 is especially significant. “Abide in me,” Jesus says, “as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself.” Growth occurs through sustained relational connection. Disconnection leads to fragmentation, fear, and dysfunction. Healthy “fruit” emerges organically from ongoing relational rootedness. For Jesus and his first followers, each individual is privileged and responsible to humbly connect to the Source of Love, God, as a branch depends upon the Vine to bear “good” fruit.

Modern attachment theory strongly supports this insight. Research increasingly demonstrates that secure relational attachment profoundly shapes emotional regulation, resilience, trust, nervous system stability, identity development, and interpersonal functioning. Human beings flourish psychologically within environments of relational safety, attunement, consistency, and belonging.

Jesus's therapeutic vision consistently reflects these realities. Transformation within his framework occurs through relational participation, secure attachment, compassionate attunement, imitation, mentoring, mutual service, and community. His repeated invitation to "follow me" and "learn from me" reflects a developmental model based not merely on acquiring information but on relationally embodied formation.

### **Powerful Individual and Communal Transformation**

This is one reason the earliest Christian communities were often so transformative despite lacking modern psychiatric knowledge or formal psychotherapy. Their power did not lie primarily in institutional structures or doctrinal precision. Rather, at their best, they functioned as relational communities organized around mutual care, humility, compassion, forgiveness, accountability, and shared growth in agápē.

**"The ... Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor, but ours as well."**

Emperor, Flavius Claudius Julianus (AD 331–363, reflecting earlier Christian practice)

Modern psychology increasingly confirms the importance of such relational ecosystems. Long-term mental health strongly correlates with meaningful relationships, social support, belonging, purpose, emotional safety, and opportunities for contribution. Group therapy, peer-support systems, attachment science, resilience research, and even addiction recovery models increasingly recognize that human beings heal most deeply within stable relational environments.

### **Compassion — Literally the willingness to "Suffer With" and for Others**

Jesus also recognized the central role of compassion in psychological transformation. His teachings consistently move individuals out of fear-based defensive states and toward compassionate relational orientation. He repeatedly interrupts retaliation, tribal hostility, dehumanization, shame, and domination.

**"In this relationship of constant self-giving, vulnerable and joyful love, shame has no oxygen to breathe." Christian Psychiatrist Curt Thompson MD., *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves*, p. 162.**

This convergence with Compassion-Focused Therapy is especially striking. CFT emphasizes the development of compassion as a means of reducing chronic threat activation, shame, self-criticism, and emotional dysregulation. According to modern neuroscience, many people operate from persistent states of defensive activation rooted in fear, trauma, humiliation, or insecurity. Compassion practices help regulate these systems and cultivate emotional safety.

Jesus's teachings repeatedly function in precisely this way. "Love your enemies." "Forgive seventy times seven." "Bless those who curse you." Such statements are often dismissed as

unrealistic moral idealism, yet psychologically they function as interventions against chronic cycles of hostility, retaliation, bitterness, and identity formation through hatred.

Importantly, this does not mean Jesus encouraged passivity, abuse tolerance, or lack of boundaries. His life demonstrates confrontation of injustice, refusal to enable exploitation, and willingness to challenge hypocrisy. However, he simultaneously rejected hatred as the organizing principle of human life. In his framework, hatred ultimately deforms the person who clings to it.

This insight aligns closely with modern research concerning resentment, chronic anger, hostility, and unforgiveness. Persistent hostility is strongly associated with stress dysregulation, relational dysfunction, anxiety, depression, cardiovascular strain, and impaired well-being. Forgiveness, while often misunderstood, is increasingly recognized as psychologically liberating even when reconciliation is impossible.

### **Woundedness Vs. Selfishness**

Another psychologically sophisticated feature of Jesus's model is his simultaneous recognition of both woundedness and selfishness.

Many modern approaches tend to overemphasize one while minimizing the other. Some frameworks reduce destructive behavior almost entirely to trauma, conditioning, or woundedness, thereby minimizing personal responsibility. Other approaches emphasize moral failure while neglecting the profound effects of developmental wounds, attachment injuries, neglect, fear, and relational trauma.

Psychologist Henri Nouwen expresses how personal woundedness can actually enhance a counselor's capacity to minister to other wounded people.

So we see how **loneliness** is the ministers' [*counselor's*] **wound**, not only because **we share** in the human condition, but also because of the unique predicament of our profession. It is this **wound** that we are called to bind with more care and attention than others usually do. For a deep understanding of our own **pain** makes it possible for us to **convert our weakness into strength** and to offer our own experiences as a source of **healing** to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood **sufferings**."

**Christian Psychologist Dr. Henri Nouwen, *THE WOUNDED HEALER: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. p. 95**

Human beings are wounded by a world deficient in agápē. Childhood neglect, betrayal, abuse, fear, rejection, humiliation, violence, social cruelty, and relational instability all shape emotional and behavioral patterns. Jesus consistently responds to suffering individuals with compassion, attunement, dignity, and restoration.

At the same time, he also recognizes the reality of self-centeredness. Human beings frequently organize life around self-protection, domination, ego preservation, status, greed, resentment, tribalism, and self-exaltation even at the expense of others. In theological language, this was often described as “sin.” Yet the Greek concept underlying much New Testament language literally refers to “missing the mark.” The missed mark is agápē.

Seen psychologically, sin is not merely rule-breaking. It is disordered relational orientation. It is the inward contraction of the self around self-interest at the expense of compassionate participation in the flourishing of others.

Psychologist and Christian, Dr. Mark W. Baker provides a concise description of “sin” that expresses the essence of Jesus’s view.

“In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus tells us that the main cause of sin in the younger son’s life is **selfishness**. ... Sin is **self-centeredness** that results in a broken relationship, and salvation is the moment that relationship is restored (79-80).”

“In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus explains **the root of sin to be selfishness** and the primary result of sin to be broken relationships. Similarly, contemporary psychological theories describe psychopathology as **self-preservation** at all costs resulting in broken relationships. Both spiritual and emotional healing come from opening yourself up to others”. [bold added]

**Christian psychologist, Mark W. Baker PhD. JESUS: THE GREATEST THERAPIST WHO EVER LIVED p. 104.**

This understanding gives Jesus’s model unusual balance. People are neither demonized nor excused. Woundedness evokes compassion, while destructive behavior still requires accountability and transformation.

Modern trauma-informed therapy increasingly reflects similar balance. Many destructive coping strategies begin as adaptive survival responses to fear, abandonment, shame, or instability. Yet healing eventually requires more than understanding the origin of these patterns. It also requires practicing new relational and behavioral ways of being.

### **Practical Habit Formation Toward Mature Character**

This emphasis on practice is another major strength of Jesus’s framework.

Jesus consistently teaches that transformation occurs through lived enactment rather than mere intellectual agreement. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice...” His model is developmental, embodied, relational, and behavioral.

This parallels contemporary understanding of neuroplasticity and behavioral integration. Lasting psychological change requires repeated experience, emotional rehearsal, corrective relational encounters, behavioral practice, and sustained habit formation. Insight alone rarely produces durable transformation.

Jesus understood this long before modern neuroscience. Love, forgiveness, humility, patience, honesty, compassion, courage, generosity, and self-regulation are not achieved instantly through belief alone. They are gradually formed through repeated participation in relational practices. This is one reason agápē is so difficult.

### **The Agape Way is Simple, But Not Easy**

Modern culture frequently conditions the opposite orientation. Consumerism, competition, image management, status seeking, digital isolation, outrage culture, tribal hostility, and immediate gratification all reinforce self-protective patterns. Agápē, by contrast, requires delayed gratification, vulnerability, humility, emotional honesty, self-regulation, patience, and willingness to sacrifice for others.

For this reason, Jesus repeatedly described the path of transformation as narrow and difficult—not because the principles are intellectually complicated, but because human beings instinctively resist the surrender of ego-centered existence.

Yet despite its difficulty, Jesus’s framework is psychologically coherent. It integrates cognition, emotion, behavior, identity, attachment, morality, meaning, and community into a unified developmental vision. One reason this framework remains compelling is that Jesus consistently focused not merely on belief, ritual, or institutional participation, but on the gradual formation of mature character. His repeated use of the metaphor of “fruit” reflects this developmental orientation. Trees are known by their fruit. Healthy roots produce healthy outcomes. The emphasis is not on external performance for appearance’s sake, but on authentic internal transformation that naturally manifests outwardly in relationships, emotional life, and ethical behavior.

This developmental emphasis is often neglected in both conservative and progressive religious environments. Conservative Christianity emphasizes individual spiritual life, doctrinal correctness, and eternal life *after* death. Progressive Christianity focuses on current life here and now, especially social justice. Both groups, however, tend to neglect training of members in the principles and practical methods for deep personal transformation and growth individually and collectively. Jesus, in contrast consistently and in a balanced way addressed both the inner and outer dimensions of social harmony.

Modern developmental psychology increasingly recognizes that durable change does not occur through intellectual insight alone. Lasting transformation involves repeated relational experience, behavioral practice, emotional integration, attentional retraining, identity restructuring, and supportive community environments. Jesus’s framework consistently incorporates these same dynamics. His teachings repeatedly emphasize lived practice rather than abstract agreement. Love, forgiveness, humility, generosity, honesty, courage, compassion, patience, and emotional self-regulation are gradually formed through repeated participation in relational practices.

This also helps explain why quick-fix approaches to psychological or spiritual growth so often fail. Human transformation is gradual. Fear, woundedness, selfishness, ego-defensiveness, tribal identity, shame, and desire for immediate gratification continually resist the developmental demands of agápē. Jesus repeatedly acknowledged the difficulty of this path, describing it as narrow not because it is intellectually complicated, but because it requires sustained surrender of ego-centered existence.

### **The Importance of Meaning & Purpose**

At the same time, Jesus's teachings strongly overlap with modern positive psychology and meaning-centered therapy. Individual maturity and social harmony consistently correlate with meaningful relationships, transcendent purpose, contribution beyond the self, gratitude, compassion, resilience, and participation in values larger than isolated self-interest. Jesus places all of these at the center of mature human life.

Importantly, none of this means Jesus's teachings replace modern psychiatry, neuroscience, or psychotherapy. Biological factors, neurological conditions, trauma severity, psychiatric disorders, medication, and specialized clinical interventions remain critically important. Nor should theology be simplistically reduced to psychology. Yet the convergence remains remarkable.

Long before modern clinical science, Jesus articulated a sophisticated developmental model centered on the transformation of the inner person through relationally embodied agápē. His framework anticipated many principles now recognized within *evidence-based* therapeutic approaches: secure attachment, emotional regulation, attentional retraining, compassionate attunement, cognitive restructuring, forgiveness, behavioral practice, relational safety, meaning, identity integration, and supportive community.

For this reason, Jesus's model deserves serious consideration not only within theology but also within psychology, philosophy, sociology, and the broader study of human harmony. Whether approached religiously or secularly, his central insight remains profoundly relevant: human beings are transformed most deeply not through domination, fear, self-exaltation, or isolated self-interest, but through growth into mature, courageous, truthful, compassionate, self-giving love. That, according to Jesus, is both the path to psychological wholeness and the foundation of social harmony.

### **Final Clarifications Concerning Agápē, Humility, Forgiveness, and Community**

#### **Humility**

Several additional dimensions of Jesus's framework deserve clarification and emphasis because they deepen the psychological coherence of his model. One is his repeated emphasis on *humility*. Humility is often misunderstood as weakness, passivity, or low self-esteem. Yet psychologically healthy humility is better understood as freedom from compulsive ego-

defensiveness and distorted self-exaltation. Humility allows individuals to perceive reality more accurately, remain teachable, regulate narcissistic impulses, admit mistakes, and maintain relational openness.

Modern psychotherapy repeatedly encounters the destructive effects of defensive grandiosity, shame-based self-protection, fragile ego structures, chronic self-justification, and compensatory identity formation. Jesus addressed these dynamics continuously. His critique of religious hypocrisy was fundamentally psychological as much as moral. He recognized that individuals often construct external performances designed to protect identity, status, or self-image while remaining internally fragmented and emotionally disconnected.

JESUS said — “Woe to you, [**religious**] scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you . . . have **neglected** the [*important matters*] of justice and **compassion** and faith. . . . **Blind guides**, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” Matthew 23:23

"The **mythos** [*the story*] of **Christianity is to me the richest** one that I know in the world. It is **endless in its profundity and what it gives rise to**. Not always good, of course. Heaven knows, anything that involves **such frail creatures** as human beings will be **interpreted and used by some** for ends that are **contrary** really to the spirit of Christianity.”

**Christian psychiatrist, neuroscientist, philosopher Iain McGilchrist. YouTube interview — "A Holistic Response to Cultural Decline,"**

**Dr. Luke Martin and Dr. Iain McGilchrist.** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jip18-FQtLA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jip18-FQtLA).

Likewise, Jesus’s warnings concerning greed, prestige, and status competition reveal deep insight into human insecurity and compensatory striving. Human beings frequently seek psychological stability through power, admiration, wealth, tribal superiority, dominance, or achievement. Yet these external pursuits rarely resolve underlying fear, emptiness, shame, or alienation. Jesus consistently redirected attention away from external status markers and toward relational depth, gratitude, compassion, service, integrity, and trust.

## **Forgiveness**

His teachings concerning forgiveness also deserve careful psychological attention. Forgiveness is often misunderstood as denial of harm, passive tolerance of abuse, or abandonment of justice. Yet Jesus’s model of forgiveness functions more deeply as liberation from corrosive cycles of hatred, vengeance, resentment, and identity formation through hostility. The greatest example in recorded history is Jesus’s prayer while hanging on the torturous cross of crucifixion when he looked below at those who had caused it and said:

“Jesus said, “Father, **forgive them**, for **they do not understand** what they are doing.”  
Luke 23:24

Modern research increasingly confirms that chronic bitterness and unresolved resentment contribute to emotional dysregulation, anxiety, depression, relational dysfunction, physiological stress activation, and diminished well-being. Forgiveness does not erase accountability or consequences, but it interrupts the internal perpetuation of destructive emotional cycles.

Importantly, Jesus embodied these principles relationally rather than merely teaching them abstractly. His interactions consistently demonstrate emotional attunement, patience, compassion, curiosity, and restoration toward wounded individuals while also confronting manipulative, exploitative, and hypocritical behavior. This combination mirrors one of the most difficult balances within effective psychotherapy: maintaining compassion without enabling dysfunction.

### **Touching the Lepers with Agape Love**

“Now a **leper came to Jesus**, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” **Then Jesus, moved with compassion**, stretched out His hand and **touched him**, . . .” — **JESUS** in Mark 1:40-42

His interactions with socially marginalized individuals are especially significant psychologically. He repeatedly moved toward people rejected by broader society: the , socially stigmatized, physically ill, morally disgraced, emotionally broken, or politically despised. Shame and social exclusion are among the most psychologically destructive human experiences. Jesus consistently interrupted shame-based exclusion through relational presence and restoration of dignity. In psychological terms, he repeatedly created corrective emotional experiences in which individuals accustomed to condemnation encountered compassion, safety, belonging, and relational acceptance.

“But the **truly revolutionary principle** was that Christian **love and charity must extend** beyond the boundaries of family and even those of faith, **to all in need.**”

Rodney Stark PhD. *The Triumph of Christianity*. Dr. Stark was one of the leading authorities on the sociology of religion. His PhD was from the University of California, Berkeley.

### **Transcendent Meaning & Purpose**

“Christianity sets forth a system of absolute moral values and affirms that God has placed within the very **structure of this universe** certain moral **principles** that are fixed and immutable. The **law of [agape] love** as an imperative is the **norm** for all of humankind’s actions.”

**Dr. Martin Luther-King Jr., p. 101, THE STRENGTH TO LOVE**

The deeply important dimension of meaning and transcendence in Jesus’s framework deserves another mention. Modern psychology increasingly recognizes that human beings require more than *superficial* pleasure, achievement, or emotional comfort to flourish. The absence of deep meaning and purpose in life contributes significantly to despair, emptiness, addiction,

hopelessness, and nihilism. Jesus consistently oriented individuals toward participation in something larger than isolated self-interest. Human life, within his framework, finds meaning through loving participation in relationship with others, contribution to the flourishing of creation, and alignment with transcendent reality itself.

For Jesus, that ultimate, transcendent reality is the Creator of the Cosmos, who exists as pure agape love. The origin of the Cosmos is acknowledged by all cosmologists as an unsolved mystery. And for theologians the full reality of God is a mystery to finite humans. Yet, we all experience the intuitive awareness that there is a Mind behind the Universe, and that an agape type of love is the highest valued virtue.

**“Jesus taught that the highest form of human development is to love others.**

**Psychological research** on moral and spiritual development confirms this. This is a state of being to aspire to, but it is not easily reached. The religious rules [*principles*] that Jesus taught served the purpose of making the love of others something that could be aspired to by all. To him, the commandments of God existed **to help human development achieve its highest state**, the **capacity** to “love one another.”

**Christian psychologist Mark W. Baker PhD, Jesus, the Greatest Therapist Who Ever Lived, p. 127**

This is why Jesus’s life and teachings continue to resonate psychologically across cultures and centuries. He presents not merely techniques for symptom reduction, but a coherent vision of mature human existence. Jesus taught and modeled a humanity grounded in the ultimate Source as the only root from which individuals, couples, families, communities, and nations can grow the fruit of the Spirit: “agápē-love...”, reflected as “. joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”.

**“Peace** I leave with you; **my peace** I give you. I do **not** give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” **John 14:17 — JESUS**

## **The Man — Jesus — and His Mission As A Living Model of Agape**

At the bare *minimum*, Jesus, when viewed solely from the perspective of his *humanity*, chose to live with deliberate intentionality as a visible, embodied disclosure of the character of God [*the transcendent Source of the Cosmos and of pure love*]. His life was not merely ethical instruction but demonstrative revelation—a lived paradigm so that observers could infer what God is like. In other words, God looks like Jesus.

“Now a **leper came to Jesus**, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” **Then Jesus, moved with compassion**, stretched out His hand and **touched him**, . . .” Mark 1:40-42

His “Way” or methodology of *psychotherapeutic* (psyche = soul) (therapeutic = healing) counseling was that of a *Good Shepherd*, a compassion-centered counselor.

In fact, the first followers called themselves people of “the way”. The term “Christian” was a negative, derogatory term first invented by the political and religious leaders of their day. These leaders sought to ridicule early followers of Jesus because their abuse of power and people was challenged by the agape-love message of Jesus and his followers. Jesus’s “Way” was the ancient wisdom, the timeless method, truths, principles, and moment to moment practice of the highest (supra-natural) form of love, which transcends the common, *natural* way of this world.

“Search me, O God, and know my **heart**; examine me, and know my **anxieties**; and see if there is any **painful way** in me, and lead me in the **timeless way**.”  
Psalm 139:23-24 (**DAVID, the shepherd who became a king in the Old Testament - OT**)

“There is a **way** that **seems** to be right, **but** in the end it leads to **death**.” OT - Proverb 14:12

“Meanwhile, [*Paul who later became a follower of Jesus*] was still breathing out murderous threats against the ... disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any [*Christians*] there who belonged to **THE WAY**, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.” Acts 9:1-2

Therefore, when Jesus spoke of himself as “the way,” he was not simply prescribing a path but presenting his own person as the interpretive key (*his life of love as the lens*) to ultimate reality. He deliberately modeled his words and life so that his actions, dispositions, and relationships would show to all those around him—in a *humanly* accessible form, the very nature of the ultimate divine (transcendent) Source of all things.

“Jesus answered, “**I AM the way** and the **truth** and the **life**. No one comes to the **Father** [*the Source of the Cosmos & of love*] **except through me**. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do **know** him and have **seen** him.” John 14:6-7

“The thief comes to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. But I have come that they may have **life**, and that they may have *it* more **abundantly**. **I AM** the good shepherd. The **good shepherd gives His life for the sheep**.” JESUS in John 10:10-11

Clearly, Jesus’s “I AM” statements about his intentional, visible, revelatory “way” of life, drew the attention and memory of his Hebrew listeners to the Old Testament Torah statements revealing God the Creator’s identity as “I AM WHO I AM”, or “I EXIST BECAUSE I EXIST”. In other words, God is the creative Source of all things, the only Self-existent Being, whose nature as compassionate, forgiving, transforming love.

“God said to Moses, “**I am who I am**. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘**I am has sent me to you**.’” — Exodus 3:14

“So Moses chiseled out **two stone tablets** [*the ten commandments about love*] ... and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the LORD. came down in the cloud and stood there with him and **proclaimed his name**, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the **compassionate** and **gracious** God, **slow to anger**, abounding in **love** and **faithfulness**, ...” — Exodus 34:4-6

[Note that when the word “Lord” is all capitalized as LORD, then it is literally in the Hebrew YHWH, which conveys the conceptual meaning of “*THE I AM*”]

Jesus, in all that he did, chose to model and represent the image, character, and way of the Self-existent Source of agape love, the only hope for lasting transformation of human hearts and of this fractured world.

“Jesus answered, ‘**before Abraham was born, I AM** [I existed]!’”  
John 8:58

“**Thomas** said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?’  
**Jesus** answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’

**Philip** said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’

**Jesus** answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.’”

## Future Essays

Now that I’m retired, I may eventually write another essay—or perhaps several essays—focused *specifically* on biblical passages in which Jesus, the New Testament writers, and the authors of the Old Testament revealed psychosocial therapeutic principles and practices that foster growth in mature agape love, both individually and relationally. Throughout more than forty years as a counselor (working with individuals, couples, and families), as well as a conflict mediator and communication coach, I have been continually amazed by the depth of ancient, time-tested wisdom preserved in the Bible.

Jesus, the early New Testament writers, and the broader witness of the Old Testament provide countless profoundly practical “how-to” teachings and living examples. These include not only direct and explicit step-by-step therapeutic guidance, but also numerous case stories of

individuals, families, and entire communities transforming destructive personal and cultural patterns into renewed lives and relationships shaped by the “way” of agape love.

For example, when examined more closely, the full context of John 15—which records Jesus’s metaphorical analogy of branches remaining connected to and dependent upon the Vine in order to produce good “fruit”—reveals a step-by-step process of psychotherapeutic and spiritual growth. Likewise, Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5–7 contains profoundly practical principles and methods for both personal transformation and healthy communal living.

The apostle Paul, who himself was transformed from a prideful, bitter, and violent religious leader into a humble counselor and teacher of love (1 Corinthians 13), describes in Philippians chapter 4 a practical and accessible process for overcoming anxiety and learning to live in peaceful contentment. It is important to remember that Paul wrote these words while imprisoned, addressing fellow Christians who were enduring severe persecution under the oppressive Roman rule that dominated the Middle East during that era.

James, a biological brother of Jesus of Nazareth, also provides deeply practical guidance in his epistle (letter/book). In the book of James, he outlines constructive approaches for enduring trials and hardships in life, while also offering profound wisdom concerning communication practices that foster cooperation, healing, and unity rather than conflict and division.

There are hundreds of similar examples throughout the 66 books of the Bible that present detailed and practical ways of applying the principles of agape love within everyday life and relationships. Yet this therapeutic dimension of the Bible is often overlooked by both religious and non-religious readers alike.

A helpful starting perspective is to view the Bible’s graphically honest portrayal of human struggles and relational problems as—at the very least—a historical record of humanity’s gradual developmental effort to understand, apply, and grow in the “way” of the Creator’s true character: the highest virtue of compassionate and unselfish love.