

The Practitioner of Agape

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The Conscious Intention of Walking in Love

by Jay Pierce

From the Unraveling Change Series

OPENING

"Love Is A Choice"

If love was easy

It would always be kind

And when mistaken

Love would never mind

But love is a choice

Not always the easiest to make

Requiring compromise

And a lot of give and take

Love is a commitment

To always find a way

Finding hope in doubt

Seeing beauty within decay

The greatest gift is love

Something never to deny

Fall in love with love

Don't let love pass you by

Jay Pierce, April 12, 2014

The Practitioner of Agape

An Introduction

This is not a book about perfect love.

Perfect love does not need a book. It does not need practice or reflection or the humbling work of looking honestly at yourself and deciding to try again tomorrow. Perfect love arrives fully formed and stays that way without effort.

That is not what this is about.

This is about the other kind. The kind practiced by flawed human beings in ordinary moments.

The kind that requires you to show up before you feel ready, to repair what broke, to extend grace when you would rather withhold it, and then to get up the next day and do it again without expecting a reward for having done it.

There is no cookie for making it through the day walking in love. There is no level you reach where the practice becomes effortless or the work becomes optional. A Practitioner of Agape does not graduate. They just keep showing up.

And here is the thing nobody warns you about.

Once you begin to understand what love actually is, once you feel it in its fullest form and recognize it for what it is, you cannot unknow it. And knowing it makes it impossible to leave others in the darkness when you have finally turned your own light back on. Not to illuminate them. Just to be a reminder that the light exists. That it is still possible. That it was never really gone.

Because we are the keepers of our light. We do not make it. We embody it. We carry it with us into every room, every relationship, every ordinary moment where we have to decide what kind of person we are going to be right now. And the effort is not in creating it. It is in the choosing. In getting up when every part of you would rather stay down. In turning it back on when dimming it felt easier than shining.

A Practitioner of Agape is not a title you earn. It is not a role reserved for the especially evolved or the spiritually advanced or the people who have suffered enough to deserve it. It is available to anyone willing to make the second by second decision to see another human being, to hold space for their humanity, to tell the truth with love still intact, to release what is no longer serving the connection, and to keep building even when the work is hard and the progress is slow and the results are invisible for longer than feels fair.

You do not have to be healed to begin.

You do not have to be whole.

You do not have to have figured out love in order to practice it.

You just have to be willing to try. To repair when you fail. To extend to yourself the same grace you are learning to extend to others. To stay in the process even when the process is uncomfortable.

Because here is what the five movements in this book are not.

They are not a checklist. They are not a formula. They are not five steps to becoming a better person that you complete in order and then set aside.

They are a cycle. One that begins again every time you encounter another human being. Every time you encounter yourself.

SEE. HOLD. GUIDE. RELEASE. BUILD.

Over and over. In relationships. In conflicts. In the quiet moments when nobody is watching and you have to decide what kind of person you are going to be right now, in this moment, with what you have available.

That is the practice.

Not a destination. A direction.

And the most honest thing that can be said about anyone walking in it is simply this.

They are trying. They are repairing. They are showing up again.

That is enough to begin.

SEE

SEE

Presence. Curiosity. Empathy.

There is a question most of us carry without knowing it.

How much of me is too much for another?

We answer it quietly, before anyone asks. We edit ourselves at the door. We let just enough through to seem open without risking the part that might be rejected. We build the wall not out of cruelty but out of memory. Because we have been too much before. Or not enough. And we learned to measure ourselves against the comfort of others before they had the chance to tell us we didn't fit.

So we stand in rooms full of people, full of noise, full of nearness, and we float.

Connection is not the absence of other people. It is the presence of being known.

When someone sees you without reaching for their red pen, something physical happens. The weight that sits on the chest, the one that keeps you breathing in half measures, lifts. And in that first full breath, something opens. The threads you have been holding carefully, cautiously, begin to reach. Not because you decided to trust. Because the body remembered what it felt like to be safe.

That is what presence does. It does not fix. It does not advise. It does not arrive with an agenda.

It simply says: I see you. And I am not leaving because of what I see.

But here is what presence requires that no one warns you about.

Space.

We are so hungry to be seen that we sometimes forget to look. We are so full of our own unheard story that when someone opens the door we flood the room. Not from selfishness. From starvation. And the person across from us, equally starving, equally hoping, closes quietly back up because there was no room for them in the seeing.

Presence is not a performance of openness. It is the practice of making room.

A Practitioner of Agape learns this the slow way. By noticing when they are waiting to speak instead of listening to understand. By catching the moment curiosity collapses into assumption, that split second when you stop genuinely wondering about another person and quietly decide you already know where they are going. And by choosing the question over the conclusion,

pausing before you land on what you think you know and staying in the not-knowing a little longer instead.

“Help me understand” are three of the most courageous words available to a human being. They require you to admit you do not already know. They require you to be interested in a reality that is not your own. They require you to stay.

And when empathy arrives, and it will, it does not announce itself. It arrives as a shift. A moment where you stop observing someone’s pain and begin to feel the weight of what it costs them. Not the same weight. You cannot carry what is not yours. But enough to understand that the bridge between you is worth building.

This is where connection begins. Not in agreement. Not in similarity. In the willingness to look at another human being and say:

“I see you. I am still here. Tell me more.”

A Moment to Reflect

Where in your life are you waiting to be seen, and where might you be taking up so much space in your longing that you have stopped making room to see another?

You do not have to answer this perfectly. You just have to sit with it honestly.

HOLD

HOLD

Compassion. Mercy. Grace.

There is a circle most people spend their entire lives drawing for others.

Inside it lives patience for human failure. Room for imperfection. The quiet understanding that a person is more than their worst moment, more than their longest struggle, more than the sum of what they could not overcome.

Most people draw this circle generously.

For their children. For their friends. For strangers whose pain they glimpse from a distance and meet with immediate tenderness.

And then they step outside it themselves.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. Just quietly, consistently, the way a person learns to do when they have spent years earning their place in rooms where love had conditions. When safety required performance. When belonging had a price.

Worth becomes a transaction so slowly you do not notice it happening. You begin to measure yourself in usefulness. In sacrifice. In how much you can carry before you ask for help. Pain starts to feel like payment. Survival starts to feel like a moral requirement. And somewhere in the accounting, you forget that none of it was ever the actual cost of being loved.

Compassion asks you to remember that suffering is not proof of goodness.

Not for others. Not for yourself.

A Practitioner of Agape learns this distinction the hard way, usually by becoming something they did not want to become. By watching their own anger seep into the places their wounds left open. By forgiving someone not because that person deserved it but because carrying it was costing too much. Because you looked down one day and realized the weight you were holding was changing the shape of you.

That kind of forgiveness is not weakness. It is an act of self-preservation dressed in the clothing of grace.

And then comes the harder work.

Turning that same mercy inward.

Looking at the colossal, complicated, imperfect record of your own life. The failures. The embarrassments. The moments you did not show up the way you meant to. The versions of yourself you are not proud of. And understanding, slowly, that all of it is just life. That you are not an exception on that path. That being human was never a debt you needed to repay.

Mercy says: you are more than your worst moment.

And that includes the worst moments you caused yourself.

Grace goes one step further. Grace does not wait for the accounting to be settled. It does not require you to have earned your way back to worthiness before it arrives. It interrupts the transaction entirely.

For some people grace arrives in a moment they cannot fully explain. A feeling. A dream. A love that required nothing from you first, that you had to consciously choose to receive not because love was absent from your life but because no one had ever shown you it was allowed to flow inward too. That you were not just a vessel for giving it. That you were also meant to be held by it.

That choosing is the practice.

Not the feeling of grace. The willingness to receive it.

Because the person who spends their life extending compassion to everyone in the room often takes the longest to notice they are allowed to stand inside the circle too.

We are taught to love others. We are reminded to love ourselves. But rarely are we shown that it is the same love, moving in a different direction. That you are not just the giver of it. You are also meant to receive it. From others. And from yourself.

You do not have to earn your place here.

You never did.

A Moment to Reflect

Think about the circle of mercy you draw for the people you love. The patience you extend to their failures. The grace you offer without requiring them to deserve it first.

Now ask yourself honestly: are you inside that circle?

Not performing your way into it. Not earning your way back to it. Just standing in it, as you are, right now.

If the answer is no, that is not a flaw. That is just where the work begins.

GUIDE

GUIDE

Truthfulness. Justice. Boundaries.

SEE asks you to look.

HOLD asks you to stay.

GUIDE asks you to be honest.

And this is where most people either go silent or go too far.

Silence feels safer. Safer for the relationship, safer for the other person, safer for the version of yourself that does not want to be the one who said the hard thing. So we watch someone we love move toward something that is costing them and we say nothing. We call it kindness. We call it respect. But sometimes silence is just fear disguised as kindness.

And then there are those who speak but forget to stay. Who deliver truth like a verdict. Who are technically correct and entirely unkind. Who confuse honesty with permission to wound.

Real care lives somewhere between silence and condemnation.

There is a kind of honesty that arrives anchored in love so securely that the truth it carries does not destroy what it touches. It sounds something like: you know I love you. You know that does not change. And I need you to hear this. Not because I am above you. Not because I have it figured out. But because I see you and I cannot unsee what I see.

That kind of truth does not hand someone a verdict. It hands them back their own agency. Because the most important thing honest love can do is remind the person receiving it that they are not a victim of their circumstances. That while they may not control what happened, they still possess agency in how they move forward. That is not a burden. That is power. And real love knows the difference between the two.

A Practitioner of Agape does not guide from superiority. They guide from alongside. They have made their own colossal mess of things. They know what it costs to choose poorly and what it costs to choose well. And it is precisely that knowledge, not perfection, that gives their honesty any weight at all.

This is also where boundaries live. Not as walls. Not as punishment. But as the architecture of a relationship that can actually hold both people without breaking either one.

A boundary is not the end of love. It is love being honest about what it can sustain. It is the recognition that Agape protects dignity, including your own. That you cannot build a bridge by disappearing into it. That staying requires you to remain someone who can stay.

Justice in Agape is not about punishment. It is about restoration. It asks not how do we make someone pay but how do we return everyone involved, including ourselves, to dignity. It holds people accountable not to diminish them but because accountability is one of the ways we say I still believe you are capable of more than this.

Before a Practitioner speaks truth in the name of love they sit with one question first: is this for them or is this for me? Because correction that serves the corrector is not justice. It is control wearing a loving face. Love that requires another person to change first is not unconditional love. It is a transaction with spiritual language. A Practitioner does not guide to relieve their own discomfort with another person's choices. They guide only when invited, only from alongside, and only when they can offer truth while leaving the other person completely free to refuse it. Love that cannot survive a no was never really love.

The highest form of honesty may actually require love in order to remain human.

Without it truth becomes a weapon. With it truth becomes a bridge.

And that is the only kind worth crossing.

Agape is the disciplined integration of compassion, truth, dignity, and responsibility.

A Moment to Reflect

Think of a truth you have been holding back from someone you love. Not to protect them. To protect yourself from the discomfort of saying it.

Now think of a truth you have been holding back from yourself for the same reason. Start there.

What would it sound like if it arrived anchored in love instead of fear or judgment?

You do not have to say it today. But sit with what it would cost you to finally let it be heard.

RELEASE

RELEASE

Forgiveness.

This movement gets only one plank.

Not because forgiveness is simple. Because it is not a step in a list. It is a room of its own. And it deserves the space.

Most people understand forgiveness as something extended toward another person. A gift. A gesture. An act of generosity that requires the other person to have earned it or at minimum acknowledged what they did.

But forgiveness practiced that way hands all the power to the person who hurt you. It makes your healing conditional on their willingness to see. And some people will never see. Some people are too damaged to go back into those moments and meet you there. Some will start to and then something will flip and the door will close again. Waiting for that door to open is not forgiveness. It is just a longer way of staying imprisoned.

Real forgiveness begins when you stop waiting.

Not because what happened was acceptable. Not because justice arrived and made it right. But because you looked at what you were carrying and decided the weight of it was changing the shape of you. That you were becoming something you did not want to become. That the anger had done its job of protecting you and now it was just staying out of habit, seeping into places it was never meant to reach.

So you put it down. Not for them. For yourself.

But forgiveness rarely travels alone.

Nobody tells you that forgiveness opens a door. They just tell you to walk through it. What they leave out is everything waiting on the other side. All the things the anger was holding back. All the feelings you did not have to sit with yet because the anger was doing the feeling for you.

The floodgates open and you find out just how much was being suppressed. That is not failure.

That is the real work finally beginning.

When the anger goes, other things surface that also need releasing.

The shame that attached itself to you as though the wound were yours to be ashamed of. The hope for justice, the quiet belief that something would eventually come along to correct what was done, to make it right in full, and the grief of accepting that nothing ever fully will.

The identity built around having been wronged. Because surviving something terrible can become the story you tell about who you are. And releasing it means you have to find out who you are without it.

A lot of people do not resist healing because they love pain. They resist because pain became coherence. Without it the questions surface fast and frightening.

Who am I?

What story explains me now?

What organizes my identity?

Those are not small questions. They are the whole excavation. And they deserve to be honored as such rather than rushed.

The need to be acknowledged by someone who may simply be too broken to give it. And the particular heartbreak of loving that person anyway. Of seeing their damage clearly. Of holding boundaries not out of cruelty but out of the recognition that without them you will both get hurt. And finally, quietly, the hardest release of all.

The acceptance of your own imperfection within the story.

Not because you deserved what happened. You did not.

Not because you caused it. You did not.

But because honest forgiveness eventually asks you to look at the full picture without turning yourself into either a villain or a saint.

To acknowledge the moments you could have responded differently. The moments fear, anger, rebellion, survival, or pain shaped your choices too.

To accept that being wounded did not make you flawless.

And that recognizing your humanity is not the same thing as accepting blame for what was done to you.

This is a profound stage of healing. Moving from binary identity, completely innocent or completely guilty, into integrated humanity.

That integration is where self forgiveness often finally becomes possible.

Not: I was bad.

Not: I was perfect.

But: I was a hurt human being trying to survive, and sometimes I handled that imperfectly.

That realization is usually far more healing than either self condemnation or self mythologizing.

This is what releasing the desire to destroy another for what happened means in practice.

Not forgetting. Memory is not the enemy.

Not excusing. Some things are not excusable.

Not pretending the wound did not happen or does not still ache sometimes.

Just releasing the vengeance. The scorekeeping. The hope that staying angry will eventually make something right that cannot be made right that way.

And releasing too the version of yourself that needed the wound to explain you.

Because you are more than what happened to you. And forgiveness, the real kind, is how you finally get to live like it.

A Moment to Reflect

What are you carrying that has already done its job of protecting you but has stayed past its purpose?

It does not have to be a person. It can be a story you tell about yourself. A wound you have organized your identity around. A justice you are still waiting for that may never arrive in the form you need.

What would it mean to put it down? Not for them. For yourself.

You do not have to be ready. You just have to be willing to ask the question.

BUILD

BUILD

Hope. Faithfulness. Joy.

You have done the harder work now.

You have learned to look. To stay. To tell the truth with love still intact. To put down what was changing the shape of you. And somewhere in all of that, without announcing itself, without a specific day you can point to, something shifted.

You started smiling. Genuinely smiling.

That is BUILD.

Not a dramatic arrival. Not a moment of completion. Just the quiet evidence that something has been growing in the space the work created. That the ground you cleared by releasing what no longer served you did not stay empty. Something took root there. Something that does not require tending the way the pain did. Something that simply lives in you now.

Hope is the first thing that changes when the real work begins.

Early hope is frantic. It sounds like please. Please let this work. Please let me matter. Please let this pain mean something. Please do not leave. It is hope with its hands wrapped tight around the outcome, terrified of what happens if the answer is no.

But hope on the other side of RELEASE sounds different. Calmer. More rooted. Less like a plea and more like a recognition.

Ah. There you are.

Not completion. Not rescue. Just the unmistakable feeling of something real meeting you in reality. Your nervous system softening instead of bracing. Time disappearing during genuine connection. Your chest opening instead of tightening. The absence of performance. The presence of arrival.

Hope at this stage is not wishful thinking. It is the lived knowledge that change is still possible because you have already changed. That people can surprise you because you have surprised yourself. That the bridge is worth building because you have crossed enough of them to know what waits on the other side.

And then there is faithfulness. The most unglamorous plank of all.

Faithfulness is not dramatic. It does not arrive in a moment of grand declaration. It is just the quiet decision to remain. To show up again. To be someone who can be counted on not because obligation requires it but because willingness chooses it.

A Practitioner of Agape stays where authenticity is possible. Where curiosity remains alive. Where humanity is protected and tenderness survives honesty. Where both people can exist

fully without shrinking. Not out of duty. Out of genuine desire to remain in the presence of something real.

That is faithfulness. Not chains. Roots.

And then joy.

Joy is the one most people expect to come first. The starting point. The motivation. The reward dangled at the beginning of the journey to keep you moving.

But joy that arrives before the work is fragile. Conditional. Dependent on circumstances staying favorable. It shatters the moment something hard arrives because it was never built on anything solid.

The joy that comes after is different.

It is not ecstatic happiness. It is not the absence of hard days or grief or struggle. It is something quieter and far more durable. It is depth of communion. The capacity to inhabit the moment you are in without needing it to be different than it is. To find genuine delight in another human being simply because they exist. To sit in the presence of someone and feel the threads connect without effort, without performance, without measuring how much of yourself is safe to show. It is what appears when fear and shame and self protection loosen their grip enough for you to actually live in your own life.

It is good that you exist.

Not because of what you have accomplished. Not because of how much you can give or carry or endure. Just because you are here. Because your particular way of moving through the world, your questions, your threads, your light, exists and therefore the world is different than it would have been without you.

That is the fullest expression of Agape. Not sacrifice. Not obligation. Not love as transaction or performance or earned reward.

Just the quiet, revolutionary act of recognizing that another human being's existence is a gift. And letting them know you see it.

And one day, without quite noticing when it happened, turning that same recognition toward yourself.

You started smiling. Genuinely smiling.

That is enough. That is everything. That is where this was always going.

A Moment to Reflect

Think about a moment recently, however small, where joy arrived without you manufacturing it. Where something in you softened without effort. Where you felt genuinely present in your own life.

What had you released to make room for it?

And what would it mean to trust that more of that is not only possible but already on its way?

You have done the work. Now let yourself live in what you built.

CLOSING

A Closing Word

If you picked this book up because something in you knew there was more, but nothing you found quite fit what you already felt to be true, this was written for you.

Not to fix you. Not to complete you. Not to hand you a system that requires you to leave yourself behind in order to belong to it.

Just to walk beside you for a little while. To say out loud what you may have already known quietly. To give language to the thing that has been living in you without a name.

You are not broken for struggling. You are not behind for still being in the middle of it. You are not disqualified for having failed, sometimes spectacularly, sometimes in ways that still ache when you think about them.

The failures are not the opposite of the win. They are the reason the win means anything at all. Every single step taken in love, toward love, adds meaning to where you are going. The path is not the obstacle. The path is the point.

And if you are in a dark place right now, if you are sitting in the closed and quiet weight of unworthiness or loneliness or anger or grief, this is what I most want you to hear.

You are not alone in there.

Love is not standing at the door with conditions. It is not waiting for you to become worthy enough, healed enough, or ready enough to receive it. It is just waiting. Patiently. Without agenda. Happy to wait as long as it takes because that is what love does when it is real.

And when you are ready, if you are ever ready, it will still be there.

There is no timeline. There is no deadline. There is no version of you that is too far gone or too complicated or too much.

You are a keeper of light. Not light you manufactured or earned or performed your way into. Light you have always carried. Light that cannot be stolen or sold or permanently dimmed, only forgotten for a while.

And sometimes all it takes is one quiet reminder that it is still there.

Consider this that reminder.

You do not have to become anything other than what you already are to begin. You just have to be willing. Willing to look. To stay. To tell the truth with love still in it. To put down what has already done its job. To keep building even when the building is slow.

That is the practice. Not a destination. A direction.

And there is too much love in the world said no one ever.

So take what fits. Leave what does not. Come back when you need to. Share it if it helped. And know that somewhere out there is a flawed human being, still very much in the middle of their own becoming, who just wanted to hug the world.

Nothing back.

And that has always been enough.

THE NAPKIN NOTE

Hey you, yeah you, you right there with those tear'd up eyes and sad face I'm talking to you! I don't know what you're going through... I could never possibly understand completely. So, I won't tell you that you'll be okay -- because honestly, that is a choice only you have the power to make.

I won't even tell you to think of the best day of your life, because see, I've been really sad too. I know that sometimes thinking of even our most beautiful memories can make it worse.

But I will tell you that I believe in you, and I'm hoping you'll choose to make it through. Because you have a very special and unique story that only you can tell. And one day, I'd love to meet you and hear all about it.

Lastly, I want to share with you something I remind myself of from time to time: We are the keepers of our light. Our light cannot be stolen or dimmed. We cannot sell it or give it away. And the fastest way to illuminate the darkness is to turn your light on! See, you and me... we were created to SHINE!!!

Light-Up Love,

Jay Pierce · @UnravelingChange

Written on a napkin at a coffee shop. Still have it.

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with those tear'd up eyes and sad
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WE WERE CREATED TO SHINE!!!
Light up
Love,
Alyssa

The Napkin Note

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