



Love

Love in English is a rather vague word and can be used in reference to people, things or actions. I love my husband, I love chocolate and I love to knit. Obviously “love” doesn’t mean the same thing in each case! So the context in which it is used, determines its meaning. Since Paul grew up a Jew who studied the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, let’s look first at the Hebrew view of love.

The Hebrew word for love, *ahav*, is used for everything from passionate, sexual love to the love of God for His people. The Old Testament confirms that love is the ultimate foundation of the covenant God made with His people, Israel. But when love is used in relation to God, the emotional aspect is generally de-emphasized—although there are a few times when it comes through. Love is the basic feeling of the religious in relation to God. Most of the time only groups of people are the objects of God’s love. In Hosea we see a spontaneous side of God’s love which binds Him to His people. In Isaiah we encounter the Father-God, or authoritarian love of God, and in Jeremiah we hear of the suffering love of God.

The Hebrew concept of love tends to emphasize inwardness and loyalty and rarely moved out of the borders of the people of God. Hillel, a rabbi in whose thoughts Paul was schooled, was one of those exceptions. He taught that in addition to the love for fellow Jews, one was to love all creatures and lead them to the law. Perhaps he was influenced by the universal love of Greek thought to which I will be turning shortly. But for the Jews of the first century, love was a relationship of faithfulness between God and humanity. It included love for God, but the source of this love was found in God. So the basic principle of love is a 3-fold relationship of God, a person and one’s neighbor.



Jesus continued in the Hebrew tradition and gave us the two most important commandments: Love for God and love for neighbor. Up to this point, His Jewish friends would be with Him 100%; but Jesus goes on in several instances to show that His concept of neighbor was not limited to the community of Jews, but to anyone who needs help. We find this in the parable of the Good Samaritan, but also in Luke 4 where God's love extends to the Gentiles in Sidon and Syria. For Jesus, love is a matter of will and action. Love for God demands a readiness to do what He asks in an unconditional manner—it is a glowing passion for God!

Reflect on this...

Think about the various ways God loves His people. What does that tell us about the kind of love Paul is talking about here in Galatians, as a fruit of the Spirit of God?

If we use Jesus' expansive definition of "neighbor," who in your community would that refer to?

Paul continues in this tradition, adding the idea that the love of God is the love of Christ and that the Church is an indivisible fellowship with Christ at the center. He re-emphasizes that the love of God implies decision. God is the one who establishes the relationship and He is the one who gives us

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His Spirit that produces love. So the work of love is God's goal from the beginning. The goal of God's love is salvation and the new creation.

In ancient Greece there were three words for love; *eros*, *philos* and *agapē*. *Eros* was by far the most important word for love in Greek literature and described the passionate love which desires the other for itself. In philosophy, from Plato on, *eros* is the epitome of uttermost fulfillment and elevation of life.

Eros, or ecstasy, was religion for these Gentiles. The mystery religions of the Greeks looked for an experience which set the senses in a frenzy, burst them out of their humanity and lifted a person above himself or herself. One scholar describes it as "All the forces of heaven and earth are second to the supreme power of *eros*. . . . No choice is left, nor will, nor freedom, to the [one] who is seized by its tyrannical omnipotence, and he [or she] finds supreme bliss in being mastered by it."¹

The second word for love in Greek is *philos*, or the love of a friend for a friend. This connotes a warm human love between equals. It is not an impulse or "intoxication" that overcomes a person, but an act or task a person may choose to become involved in.

The last word for love, *agapē*, for the Greeks, had nothing of the power of *eros*, and little of the warmth of *philos*. It meant to be satisfied with something and indicated a choice or a preference. So if you loved (*agapaō*) someone or something, you preferred it to another person or thing. *Eros* is a general love of the world that seeks satisfaction wherever it can find it, *agapē* is a love that makes distinctions, chooses and is loyal to its love. *Eros* is

impulsive, *agapē* is a “free and decisive act.” *Eros* is characteristic of the Greek love of a person for the divine; while *agape* is descriptive of the condescending love of a god, which lifts the one of lower status. *Eros* seeks to fulfill its own desires while *agapē* is a giving love which acts on the behalf of others.²

So, if you were Paul, which Greek word would you use to convey the idea of Christian love? Paul, in the tradition of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) chose the Greek word *agapē* and pours into it the particular meaning of Christian love—God’s love for human beings, Christian love between fellow believers and the Christian’s love for God.

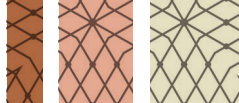
The best place to see this is in 1 Corinthians 13. The first three verses of chapter 13 talk about the necessity of *agapē* love for those in the Church.

Reflect on this...

Think about the three Church audiences Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Do these compare to modern audiences who need to understand the meaning of God’s love?

Take time to read 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is kind. This is a rich word which means grace-filled, or gracious, compassionate service to another. It is also closely associated with the idea of being good citizen or person who is deeply appreciated in a community.



Love does not envy or boast and is not proud. It is easy to cry and pray with those who are having problems.

Love is not rude. How contrary to much of our culture this is! But it goes back to the idea that each person is a creation of God who deserves our respect. Christian love is not self-seeking; it is others-oriented.

Love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. Selfish people get irritated easily when people or things get in the way of their desires. Christian love looks out for the good of the other person and is patient when things don't go their way.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. Some scholars personify “the Truth” and see it as referring to Christ. However, I don't think it needs to be limited to that. Christian love will always be a force for the truth in whatever situation it finds itself in.

Love always protects. In other words, Christian love will not gossip or say things that will be hurtful to another's reputation. How difficult this is sometimes when there is a person or group of persons our associates love to make fun of or complain about! But Paul tells us that love always protects!

Love always trusts and always hopes. Sounds kind of naive to our modern ears! Love ALWAYS trusts and ALWAYS hopes? Come on—isn't there a point at which we stop trusting and hoping? As much as we may want to deny it, Christian love is optimistic and looks on the positive side of situations and issues.

Love always perseveres and never drops out. The Greek word is “falls” not “fail” and indicates that love outlasts everything. If there is one thing we need today it is Christians who will persevere and stay through the conflicts that inevitably come when there are groups of people living and working together.

Christian love, *agapē* as defined by Paul, is a unique love whose source is God. Let's ask God to give us His Spirit that will produce this love in our hearts! Then whatever our abilities, Christian love will make them effective for God's kingdom and fulfilling and rich experiences for us. ●

Reflection on this...

Which aspect of "agapē" is the most difficult for you? Why?

Ask God to remind you in the hurry of life, of the characteristics of His love and to give you the ability to act with "agapē" love.

