

Finding True Love

“Greg – thanks for the \$50! I *love* you, man!”

“I really *love* my wife.”

“God *loves* you.”

“I’m a 16-year-old with a *hot* girlfriend! I really *love* her . . .”

“I *love* my brothers and sisters in the church.”

“I really *love* my car and my job.”

“My kids are my life – I *love* them a lot!”

One word and yet so many applications! What is *true* love? How does God *love* us? How should we love our husbands, wives, or fellow man? Answering these questions can help us in our personal or professional lives, marital relationships, and manifestation of faith. We’ll first differentiate different kinds of love to better understand what *true* love is.

Most notably, true love isn’t a *feeling*. We usually associate a mushy, warm, down-in-our-gut emotion (feeling) with love and often mistake it for the presence of God’s Spirit. However, the true love we’re to exhibit and God’s love for us are related to *faith and action*, not emotion. Let’s take a further look at these variations of emotion and actions often called love.

Four basic loves are mentioned in the Bible: (1) lust or desire; (2) fondness for a person or thing; (3) moral obligation; and (4) charitable action that perhaps comes from moral obligation. Two are related to pure emotion: lust and fondness. The Holy Scriptures reflect all of four types primarily in these Greek root words:

1. *epithumeo* or *epithumia* for lust
2. variations of *phil* (as in *philanthropea* or *Philadelphia*) for fondness
3. *agapao* for moral obligation
4. *agape* for charitable action

Beginning with the first type, lust or a desire for something that often ends in sexual sin is represented by these possibilities:

- *Epithumeo*, which means to long for or covet (even sexually as proclaimed by Jesus) (cf. Matthew 5:27-28).
- *Epithumia*, which Paul says is the desire of the flesh (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3). If we practice sinful behavior in response to this ‘feeling’, we’ll suffer judgment.
- *Haw-hab* is a label that can be pinned on sexual relations as with the 1Kings 11 revelation that Solomon *loved* many women.

On the other hand, when we say we *love* something or someone we’re most likely just expressing our **fondness** for that object or individual. The root of this type of love is *phil* and variations are as follows:

- *Phileo* represents an individual, thing, or position. For instance, Jesus tells us of the futility of fasting in such a way as to display your discomfort to others. Their sympathy will be all this action will reap (cf. Matthew 6:16). He also describes the same basic love for attention when telling the story of the Pharisees who enjoyed being observed as they prayed (cf. Matthew 6:5-7).

- *Philadelphia* is used by the writer of Hebrews (13:1) to describe brotherly love. Although it may refer to affection we have for other followers of Christ, it should also lead to action as we ensure their needs are met.
- *Philarguria* is the love of money – greed. This is certainly a trap for many and one that’s hard to separate yourself from if you fall prey to it. The rich man Jesus spoke of (the one that sadly refused to sell all he had to follow Him) probably suffered from this type of love (cf. Mark 10:17-22). Be content with what you have to avoid this pitfall.
- *Philandros* describes the love of a woman for her husband (e.g. Titus 2:3-5).
- *Philoteknos* indicates maternal love as we read in Titus 2:4.
- *Philanthropea* is a label for the love we may *feel* for mankind. Paul used this word to describe the love God has for us, which drove Him to save us through the Christ (cf. Titus 3:3-5).

Unfortunately, we often get caught up in believing the good *feeling* that accompanies emotional well-being is the Spirit working within us. While that may be true at times, feelings come and go, resulting in no specific spiritual fruit and offering no spiritual foundation. In fact, this mistaken identity can cause us to believe God’s Spirit has departed us at times, sending us into a spiritual wasteland so-to-speak. Is there a love that’s more consistent and not based on emotion? You bet – it’s one that manifests itself in a way that has a positive effect on others. *Agapao* and *agape* loves both fall into this category.

Love labeled by the Greek word *Agapao* is a sense of obligation that *could* lead (or has led) to action. We’re obligated to love God with everything we are and have. We’re also obligated to love others as ourselves. These are the two main commandments Jesus gave us, exclaiming that all the others are wrapped up in them (cf. Matthew 22:35-40). In fact, the 10 commandments can indeed be divided into two groups: those related to loving God and those pertaining to loving – or acting in certain ways – toward our fellow man.

Earlier, we learned from Paul that God saved us through Christ because He felt *philanthropea* (love for mankind). John too mentions this gift of salvation, but from the perspective of the sense of *obligation* (*agapao*) He had toward us (cf. John 3:16). If we wish to reciprocate, we’ll obey His commandments as Jesus stated in John 14:15.

Can you imagine what life would be like without the love that manifests itself in obligation? Unstable and sporadic lust or occasional fondness would come and go like the wind leaving nothing to ensure consistent, Godly treatment of our family members or brothers and sisters in Christ. Without a sense of obligation, God would surely have just wiped us out for good without a second thought. Without this type of love, there’d be no hope for married couples or friends. Anger would sever relationships for good. Reconciliation or redemption would be impossible. For *agapao* to work, obligation must lead to action.

We’ve arrived at the final type of love: *agape*. It’s the love that equals action and the core of Paul’s message in 1Corinthians 13. The Greek word suggests a charitable love, again one of action. It could come as a result of *agapao* (sense of obligation). It doesn’t matter, though. The action is certainly more important than any feeling or sense of obligation that may’ve spawned it.

Paul wrote quite a dissertation on love in his first letter to the church at Corinth (cf. 1Corinthians 13). His message is divided into three parts:

- Part I: Verses 1-3, which introduces wrong intent
- Part II: Verses 4-7, which describes true love
- Part III: Verses 8-13, which puts true love into perspective when compared with spiritual gifts, hope, and faith

In the first part (verses 1-3), Paul states something that may be shocking to some of us: even if we have spiritual gifts such as tongues or prophecy, they’re **ineffective** if we do them for our benefit and not that of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. He goes on to say that even charitable action or martyrdom – the giving

away of all our possessions or being killed for our beliefs – mean nothing if done for the wrong reason. What is the *right* reason? We'll explore that later . . .

Paul goes on to tell us what true love is, does, or doesn't do in verses 4-7. He's very clear that true love isn't centered on self. And in the spirit of 'turning the other cheek' to allow for mercy and reconciliation, we learn that love is patient, interested in righteousness, and forgiving.

Finally, we learn in Part III that the gifts mentioned in verses 1-3 are temporary and just part of who we are in our faith. These things are incomplete and useless without love (proper intent) and will be unnecessary once our Messiah returns. We understand now that Jesus desires for us to show agape love to others. Did he have anything else to say about this type of love?

Jesus told us that agape love and, therefore, charitable action will decrease in the last days (cf. Matthew 24:8-13). This makes sense when you consider that self-love, which Jesus also said would happen in the last days, leaves no room for charitable action toward others. The opposite is also true: taking our eyes off ourselves enables the agape love that is the consideration of others and their needs. Jesus also said that charitable actions we take out of agape love prove we're His disciples (cf. John 13:34-35).

While our actions on their own won't save us, the absence of action – faith without works – will condemn us. We only need to look at Jesus' dissertation on the Mount of Olives to confirm this fact. There, He gave a parable of the judgment to come, comparing the outcome for those who indeed practiced agape love to what waits for those who didn't (cf. Matthew 25:31-40).

What now? We've shown that we need to obey God and therefore Jesus' commandments, which lead us to treat God appropriately and man charitably. That sense of obligation comes out of our love for God and Jesus. As we become more confident in our salvation, our faith in God and the Christ grows. That faith gives birth to love and resulting action. The only thing left is to teach others to build their faith and enable the right kind of love for God, Jesus, and mankind.

Jesus commanded us to make disciples (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). Failure on our part to teach others how to love God and His Christ would result in weak or non-existent faith in others. They'd never hear the Gospel and would perish in the end out of ignorance. Those that did hear and believe would never become equipped to also do good works in Jesus due to a lack of mentoring.

Telling others the good news of salvation and then mentoring them gets easier as you increase your own faith and gain confidence in the Gospel. Programs that provide Scripture and foundational topics in an organized and easy-to-read fashion can be helpful in guiding you and the disciples in your efforts. Regardless of how we get there, we need to love others by taking care of their needs and entering into discipleship. Nothing else will do, and there's no other way.

In summary, there are two Biblical loves based on emotional *feeling*: lust or desire, and fondness. Lust is more short-lived than fondness, but both can fade – depending on how we feel. Two related loves are *agapao* and *agape*. One is a sense of obligation that should lead to action. The other is indeed action that needs to take place regardless of our feelings. God has loved us – honored His obligation to us by offering salvation through Jesus. We must in turn love Him by honoring our obligation to obey His commandments to take care of others and preach the good news. Anyone who confirms the covenant with the Messiah by partaking of the communion cup agrees to do this (more on the marriage fulfillment in a later discussion)!

My challenge for you is no different than our Messiah's: take care of the poor and the body of Christ in *agape* love, and make disciples. Take a baby step this week toward making that happen. Perhaps it'll take the form of an introduction to a neighbor, taking requests for prayer, buying groceries or utilities for another, or telling someone about Jesus. Regardless, do something in true love while you can.