What Kind of Love? **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 5 November 2017 - 22:14



Read time: 8 minutes
What is love?

I do not mean this as a rhetorical question. I want you now to pause for a few seconds or minutes, and answer this question for yourself. What emotions come up when you think of love? To whom does your mind turn? If we were play a word association game, and you are given to word "love" and need to say the first thing that comes into your mind, without hesitation, what would it be? Do you think of your lover, spouse or crush? Are you reminded of a family member, a child or parent, or a really close friend? Do you perhaps think of God and the church?

According to the Apostle Paul, "love is patient and is kind; love does not envy. Love does not brag, is not proud, does not behave itself inappropriately, does not seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."1 Just before this passage, Paul goes as far as saying "if I do not have love, I am nothing"2. Jesus also has a high opinion of love. When questioned on what a person's greatest duty is, Jesus replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18:

> Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."
>
> Matthew 22:37–40

Both of these passages are quite familiar. The former, in particular, is a favourite at weddings, so even non-Christians may be familiar with it. In order to really appreciate the message which is being conveyed in this passage, I want to consider the word "love" as used in this passage. It may seem self-evident, but is more nuanced than one might think. For this exercise, I want to digress briefly to consider how "love" was understood in ancient Greece. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, mostly to a Greek audience (such as the congregation at Corinth, to which Paul was writing). In ancient Greek, there were four words used to describe "love". Therefore, to understand what these passages were intended to say, and not to say, we need to look at which of these nuances were used.

Three Greek Loves

Before continuing, I need to give a disclaimer: I am not an expert in Greek. The following is my basic understanding after consulting several sources.

The first word used by the ancient Greeks to denote love is **eros**. Eros was also the name of a god in the Greek pantheon. His Roman counterpart was Cupid, and he is the god of sexual attraction. From this Greek word we get the English word "erotic". Eros is then typically thought of as being physical love, sensual love and lust. This narrow view of eros might be uncharitable, because in his work the *Symposium*, Plato (through the character of Socrates) had argued that the physical pursuit of eros was base and self-serving, while the more noble goal was to be other-serving, and to eventually transcend and value and appreciate beauty in and of itself[3].

The second word was **philia**. This is commonly understood to be friendship or affection. It is used for friendships, love within a family, and more. From this word we get of our "love of" words, for example a bibliophile is a lover of books, philosophy is the love of wisdom, and pedophilia is the love for, and sexual attraction to, children who have not yet reached puberty. We see, therefore, that philia can also encompass sexual attraction; indeed, it can be used broadly. Philia, too, gets a philosophical treatment in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he argues for the virtue of sincere philia[4].

The third word is **storge**, which is typically a familial love, so it is concerned with respect, affection, acceptance and loyalty.

The Fourth Love

In the passages cited above, none of these three loves are used. Instead, all these passages use the word "agape". **Agape** is, in brief, godly love. It has a rough equivalent in Hebrew, which is *ahev*[5]. The best definition of agape, for the purpose of this article, which I found came from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [2]:

> Agape refers to the paternal love of God for man and of man for God but is extended to include a brotherly love for all humanity.

In using the word "agape", the writers of the New Testament wanted their readers to understand the depth, totality and universality of the love that they meant.

Rethinking Love

Let us return to the question of whom you think of when you hear "love". Perhaps you have been at a wedding ceremony where the pastor preached on 1 Corinthians 13. "Love is patient and is kind; love does not envy. Love does not brag, is not proud, does not behave itself inappropriately, does not seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." We may nod and think to ourselves, yes, a wife should be patient with her husband; she should not be envious of him; the husband should not get provoked, but be gentle; she should not remember is failings; they should be truthful with each other; they should endure together; they should persevere in their love through good and bad times; yes; yes...

But that is not what this passage is saying. At least, the passage is saying this, but so much more. It speaks to more than the couple getting married. It challenges everyone to look differently at the wedding guests, the catering staff, the band members, the motorists while on the way home. Agape challenges us to take a step back, to not see husbands and wives, hosts and guests, rich and poor, bosses and workers; we see just people. By their very nature people have a need to be loved, respected, protected and cherished. And it is every person's duty, even if it is difficult, to display

such love to all people.

God created us with this need to be love fully and wholly. But even if we are unable to love in such a manner (and cannot be loved as such), He is the One who can and does love us completely. His love is never lacking and always available.

Conclusion

When Jesus or the apostles taught on love, they were not speaking of romance, family or friendship. These loves would be too narrow. Yes, one must love one's spouse. Yes, one should love one's family, and even their friends and neighbours. But we are called to more: we should love the stranger, the criminal, the sinner. Indeed, we are called to love all people. This is not a baseless axiom or platitude: we are called to love, because we love God; because God loves us, and loved us first. Love is not selective, it is not conditional. And as we think about our own failings to love as we should, let us remember that we are loved despite our failings, and may that encourage us to love more.

- 1. 1 Corinthians 13:4–8.
- 2. 1 Corinthians 13:2
- 3. Plato lived several centuries before the time of the New Testament. It can be assumed to some educated Greeks during the time of the New Testament would be familiar with Plato's works. Indeed, two hundred years after the New Testament was written, a movement name *neoplatonism* became popular, wherein the teachings of Plato were re-emphasised.
- 4. Aristotle was Plato's student, so his works would also likely have been known to the educated Greeks, although Aristotle only really came to prominence during the Middle Ages.
- 5. The Gospel of Matthew is often presumed to have been written for a primarily Jewish audience, although in Greek. If this is true, then the use of "agape" should be thought as meaning "ahev" in the minds of the Jewish audience.
- . Photo credit: Bob AuBuchon [3].

Categories:

- Terminology & Concepts [4]

Tags:

- love [5]
- agape [6]
- eros [7]
- philio [8]
- storge [9]
- plato [10]
- aristotle [11]
- symposium [12]
- socrates [13]
- nicomachean ethics [14]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1176

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1176
[2] http://www.iep.utm.edu/love/#SH1c
[3] https://www.flickr.com/photos/bobaubuchon/2266418298/
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/36
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/41
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/729
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/730
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/731
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/732
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/733
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/734
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/735
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/736
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/737