

“But the Greatest of These . . .”

DEFINING LOVE

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I. Introduction

Love is a word commonly tossed around today that has little real meaning. In modern America, it means anything you want it to mean. Most have no idea or a warped one of what it means to love or be loved. When people think about *loving* someone, they think only of loving one who loves them. Jesus turns this idea upside down when He tells His followers to *love their enemies* (Matthew 5:43-44). This was a revolutionary idea. We love those who love us and hate those who hate us. Jesus tells us to forget that idea. *Love your enemy!* In First Corinthians, Chapters 12-13, Paul talks about Christian spiritual gifts and virtues. He says they are important but in comparison to love, they sink. *Why?* Because they will eventually end while love will last *forever!*

II. Types of Love

The Greek language in which the New Testament is written has many words that are translated into one English word: *love*. They cover a wide range of relationships such as spiritual, familial, friendly, and romantic. When Bible translators translate these words and concepts into the common English word: *love*, confusion often results.

A. Agape

Walther Guenther says that in the secular Greek language *agape* was “quite colorless as a word.” Outside the Bible and Christian writings, it was used as a substitute for romantic love and friendly love (both have separate *Greek* words). It was rarely used in reference to religion. Here it is the idea of a person or God acting in a generous way toward others. Christian writers took the idea and turned it into the concept of God’s divine love for man plus, how man responds to God’s love and a Christian’s love for a fellow Christian. The main idea of *agape* is God’s love for man. It is this love that caused God to send His Son into the world to save mankind (John 3:16). God didn’t *have* to save us. Man, starting in the Garden of Eden, chose to reject God. Ever since, men have chosen to be enemies of God (Romans 5:10). We fail to live in a pure and holy relationship with Him. God, as man’s Creator and Judge, has the legal right to declare man guilty and pass judgment on him. This would send all men to burn eternally in Hell. God, however, refused to exercise His

legal rights and provided a way for man to restore his relationship with God. As Divine Judge, God decided to become the *Divine Savior* also. He did so by taking on human flesh, living as a man, and although sinless – dying for sinful man. Jesus did not die for a select few. He died for ALL. So, all have the choice of either remaining enemies or accepting Jesus' sacrifice and becoming a child of God. God's divine love – *agape* – dwells with His children. When man responds to God's love, his love is also called *agape* or *divine* love. It is divine not because man is divine but because God's divine love fills him. Also, when a Christian shows love to another Christian, he is sharing God's divine love with a fellow believer. This idea of *reflected agape* is similar to the relationship between the sun and the moon. The sun is the source of light and shines brightly upon the earth. The moon has no light within itself but reflects the sun's light upon the earth. God is the source of divine love – *agape* – while we are as the moon, basking in His love and reflecting it back to Him.

B. **Storge**

This is the idea of a mutual feeling of affection (love), especially between parents and children. It is rarely used to describe a husband-wife relationship. In the New Testament, it is usually used in a negative sense – as heartless or without natural affection (Romans 1:31 and Second Timothy 3:3).

C. **Phileo**

This is the idea of showing affection (love) and hospitality. Normally, it is used in reference to someone who is *not* a family member. It is often translated as “brotherly love.” *Phileo* is used to show love for friends or for people who are bound together in some type of relationship. It is frequently used in the New Testament for love between Christians.

D. **Eros**

This is the idea of romantic love. It is a sensual longing and craving desire like the the love between a man and woman . . . a husband and wife. It is best seen in the *Song of Solomon* as Solomon graphically describes his wife's physical appeal. Since *eros* involves human “passion” – it can also be combined with *lust* outside the marriage relationship and take us down destructive paths.

III. Love Is Not . . .

A. **Love Is Not Envious** (First Corinthians 13:4)

Envy is wanting something that belongs to someone else. When envious, we hold a grudge against the other person for owning it. It is the idea of wanting to take it away from him so we can have it. Envy is always evil - never neutral. In Galatians 5:21, it is one of the *works of the flesh*. When one is envious, he is not following God. He has given himself over to Satan. When we love someone in the right way, we are possessive. This possessiveness causes us to express longing for or a desire to be with the object of our love. It is the idea of wanting the best for that person. It is *not* the idea of owning the other person.

B. **Love Is Not Proud** (First Corinthians 13:4)

This is the idea expressed by several Greek words translated *arrogant, puffed up, or*

boastful. A proud person is so conceited and inflated by his/her own self-worth that nobody else matters. No one likes being around such people. Arrogance can be based in wealth, intelligence, family status, political position, or almost anything that is used to elevate self. Such is condemned by God. Solomon writes, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (Proverbs 16:18). He declares the proud will eventually pay for it. The price means ruin and destruction – *in this world or the one to come* (eternity). In a parable, Jesus told of two men going to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). One was a tax collector (considered a traitor, collaborator and hated by the Jewish people). He confessed he was a sinner and asked for God's mercy. The other was a religious leader who claimed God was lucky to have him. He boasted of all the good he did and said nobody could match his accomplishments. What did Jesus say about these men? The tax collector was pardoned by God and sent home justified. The religious leader was rejected and disgraced. Jesus said people who are proud will be destroyed by God but those who confess their sins and treat people with love will find divine favor. James writes of the damage caused by pride. An arrogant person's tongue is *like a match in a forest*. From a small spark a great forest fire rages, destroying all in its path. The tongue is the same. It is a small body part but can set us on the course to Hell (James 3:5-6).

C. **Love Is Not Rude** (First Corinthians 13:5)

When people are puffed up with pride or arrogance, they behave rudely toward others. They treat people as if they were mere things to be used for their own pleasure. They forget everyone should be regarded with respect, honor, dignity, and consideration.

D. **Love Is Not Selfish** (First Corinthians 13:5)

Selfish people don't care about others. They see only what they want. When selfish people don't get their way, they sulk, pout, and get mad. Although adults, they act like spoiled children. They have not grown up. First Kings 21 illustrates this evil with King Ahab and Naboth. Naboth (a commoner) had a vineyard next to Ahab's palace. Ahab wanted it and tried to buy it. When Naboth refused to sell, Ahab acted like a baby. He went to bed and refused to eat or talk to anyone. Do you know how spoiled children hold their breath until they pass out? Jezebel, Ahab's wife, told him to quit acting like a child and act like a powerful King! She had Naboth killed and stole his family's vineyard! Because of Ahab's selfishness, a righteous man lost his life and his family's possessions were stolen.

E. **Love Is Not Easily Provoked** (First Corinthians 13:5)

This is not wearing your feelings on your sleeve. It is not allowing yourself to become embittered, insulted, or enraged by a real or imagined insult. Paul says it is better to be cheated by a brother than to become angry and file a lawsuit against him. When we react with angrily toward others – especially a fellow Christian – we allow Satan to control us (First Corinthians 5:1-8 and Ephesians 4:25-27).

F. **Love Thinks No Evil** (First Corinthians 13:5)

This is the idea of not keeping a record of evil that others do. This goes back to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-48) when Jesus told the crowd to love their enemies and pray for those persecuting them. Jesus ends the text saying: "There-

fore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” As God is loving and forgiving – so should we be . . . loving and forgiving.

- G. **Love Is Not Happy When People Sin** (First Corinthians 13:6)
God declares that sin is lawlessness and sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Love sees sin as an offense against God. Only enemies of God will rejoice in sin and try to get others to sin also (Romans 1:32).
- H. **Love Is Not a Quitter** (First Corinthians 13:8)
Paul says, “Love never fails.” This goes back to the fact that God is the source of love. God is Love. If we are like Him – our love will exist from eternity to eternity.

IV. Love Is . . .

- A. **Love Is Patient** (First Corinthians 13:4)
Patience is the idea of *persistence* – an unswerving willingness to wait for events to happen rather than forcing them. Normally, we think of patience as passive. It is not. It is an always active virtue. It is not just waiting for something to happen but to actively prepare for it to happen. It helps us meet our neighbors, friends, family, and enemies halfway and to share God and our life with them.
- B. **Love Is Kind** (First Corinthians 13:4)
According to Erich Beyreuther, kindness is *moral excellence and perfection* in which greatness is linked with *a genuine goodness of the heart*. It is an essential element of love. You cannot show love without being kind.
- C. **Love Rejoices In the Truth** (First Corinthians 13:6)
The word *truth* as it is used in the New Testament can mean . . .
- that which is the opposite of a falsehood, concealment, or deception
 - the Gospel itself
 - God’s revelation to man, or
 - that which exposes human falsehood.
- In First Corinthians 13:6, *truth* is contrasted with unrighteousness. Therefore, love rejoices when evil is defeated and a person turns to God’s *truth* for salvation. What greater love can we show one another than to want him or her to leave a life of serving Satan and become an active member of the Lord’s family? Love wants to spend eternity in Heaven with those we are close to on earth.
- D. **Love Bears All Things** (First Corinthians 13:7)
Bearing all things is not the idea of a heavy load placed on us. Although we may carry the load, we complain about the injustice. Nor does it suggest we carry the load with stoic resignation while silently resenting it. Instead, it’s the idea of quietly enduring suffering from some wrong done to us. Love does not complain or resent unfair treatment. Jesus is our Model for enduring love. He came to earth as our Savior while we were yet enemies. While here, He was ridiculed by the religious leaders among His own people, rejected by the majority, betrayed and abandoned by His closest followers, given a phony trial, brutally beaten, and killed in the most painful manner devised by man. How did He respond? There was no limit to Jesus’

love for us. As John wrote in John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son.” The Son showed the unlimited nature of this love when He suffered and died. Instead of striking back to destroy His enemies, Jesus died that even they might be reconciled and enjoy eternal life. When we love as Jesus loves, we bear mistreatment so others can come to a knowledge of God and obey Him.

E. **Love Believes All Things** (First Corinthians 13:7)

This is not the idea of believing everything: bad or good – evil or righteous – about someone. It is the idea of believing in the good that people do. Too frequently, when someone does something good for another person, his motives are brought into question. We try to figure out *why he did it*. What is in it for him? Love says that people do good for others because that is the way God wants them to behave. The only motive for doing good is to be more like Christ.

F. **Love Hopes** (First Corinthians 13:7)

Hope is not pessimistic. Hope is optimistic! Hope is based in God’s grace. We look around and see fellow human beings and want what is best for them. We hope they will turn their backs on Satan and follow Christ.

G. **Love Is Greater than ALL God’s Gifts** (First Corinthians 13:9)

God provides all men with certain gifts or natural abilities. Those who obey Him are given His Spirit to live within them (Acts 2:38). God (Holy Spirit) takes those natural abilities and strengthens them so we can use them in His service. In the First Century, the Holy Spirit also provided special spiritual, supernatural abilities. Some of these were the ability to speak in foreign languages never learned, the ability to *understand* foreign languages never studied, the ability to miraculously heal the sick, and the ability to receive direct revelations from God. These gifts – both supernatural and natural – while important, are not as important than love. They are given to us by God to serve Him. Love is greater because it makes us like . . . God.

H. **Love Will Last Forever** (First Corinthians 13:13)

All created things will be destroyed when Jesus returns in Judgment. Faith and hope will not be needed. Divine knowledge and fulfillment of all our hopes will replace them. Only love will remain because it is *the very essence of God*. We, too, must follow this example. As God *is* love, we also must become love. Love is not something we do. It is part of our *identity in Christ*.

V. Conclusion

God is love (First John 4:16). God is the source of all love. Without God, we sink into a deep pit. When we reflect God’s love to each other, we rise to the heights of the glory God created us for. When we reflect God’s love, we do good to others. We want the best for them. When we reflect God’s love, we don’t hurt others or use them as if they were unimportant. When we reflect God’s love, we treat all men as the most valuable people in the world. In fact, each one of us is of highest value in the Lord’s sight. God so loved the world that His Son came to live and die in order for each of us to live with God throughout Eternity. Jesus did not die for a faceless mass of humanity, but for each of us. When we follow God’s example, we love each other *out of a pure heart, religiously*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

1. In the New Testament, the Greek word for God's love for man is
(a) *agape* (b) *eros*
(c) *phileo* (d) none of these
2. When man shows *agape* love, he is reflecting the love of
(a) his wife (b) the world
(c) God (d) all of these
3. *Storge* is the love between parents and
(a) God (b) animals
(c) children (d) stars
4. *Phileo* is the idea of
(a) Philip (b) natives of the Philippines
(c) a TV brand (d) brotherly love
5. The idea of wanting something that belongs to another is
(a) envy (b) ivy
(c) anger (d) none of these
6. One who does not care about anyone else is
(a) selfless (b) selfish
(c) other-centered (d) all of these
7. Actively preparing, while waiting, for an event to happen is
(a) stupidity (b) being stubborn
(c) being patient (d) being bored
8. You cannot show love without being
(a) alone (b) in a crowd
(c) kind (d) all of these
9. Our best example for enduring love is
(a) Joan of Ark (b) Peter the Zealot
(c) Jesus Christ (d) my grandma
10. Love will last
(a) a lifetime (b) 40 days and nights
(c) 1000 years (d) forever