

Theme Study: Love

Art Lindsley

It has become a well-known truth that the Greek culture (unlike English) had a few words for love—stergo, phileo, eros, and agape. Since eros—romantic love is not found in the New Testament, our study has mainly to do with the other three and, most centrally, agape.

The verb stergo means to feel love or affection such as the love of parents for their children. The verb form does not appear in the New Testament. The root does appear in a couple combination words: astorgos—without affection or unloving (Rom 1:31; II Tim 3:3) and philostorgos—brotherly love (Rom 12:10).

Phileo is often used in the New Testament for the concept of love. The noun philos, meaning relative or friend, and philia meaning friendship (or love) is often used. Often the distinction between agape and philea is overemphasized. Both are used sometimes interchangeably for love. For instance, in John 21 Jesus asks Peter twice if he loves Him (agapao) and Peter responds that yes he loves (phileo) Him. The third time Jesus asks whether Peter loves (phileo) Him and Peter responds in kind (phileo). Some commentators (Wescott) have tried to make a significant difference in meaning between agape love and friendship love in this passage, but the best evidence seems to indicate that John and often the Greek culture used agapao and phileo interchangeably.

Surprisingly, the noun agape is a late Greek construction, used only once outside the Bible in a passage where the goddess Isis is given the title agape. Even the verb agapao, in Greek culture, is used in a bland and colorless way, often with a meaning equivalent to eros and phileo.

By contrast, the New Testament uses agape and agapao as the primary words to speak of God's relationship to mankind and fills the words with a rich meaning. Agape shares with the eros of Greek culture a deep feeling. God not only wills to love us but cares deeply for us.

Anders Nygren has written an influential work *Agape and Eros* which points out that eros essentially means a love for the lovely while agape can be used as a love for the unlovely. Eros is motivated by beauty in the one loved whereas agape can be unmotivated by any admirable quality in the one loved such as in Jesus' command to love our enemies.

When Jesus commands us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind as well as loving you neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:37-39), he is making a profound summary of the intent of the Law. Others such as the lawyer in (Luke 10:27) and Rabbi Akiba said that the love of neighbor constituted a summary of the Law. However, Jesus was unique and radical in the way that he defined the neighbor.

In Jesus' day debate raged as to who was included in the definition of "neighbor," and some sought to draw Jesus into the debate. In Luke 10 the lawyer mentioned above asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). New Testament scholar T.W. Manson comments that even the question is revealing: "The question is unanswerable and ought not to be asked. For love does not begin by defining its objects; it discovers them. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan establishes His view on being a neighbor to others."

Meanwhile, some Jewish leaders insisted that Gentiles, heretics, or Samaritans, were not neighbors. A rabbinic comment, or "midrash" on Ruth says that Jews should not seek the death of Gentiles, "but if they be in any danger of death, we are not bound to deliver them; e.g. if any of them fall into the sea, you shall not need to take them out for it is said, 'Thou shall not rise up against the blood of thy neighbor, but such a one is not your neighbor.'"

In the Jewish apocryphal book Sirach we see similar advice given:

If you do a kindness, know to whom you do it, and you will be thanked for your deeds. Do good to a godly man and you will be repaid—if not by him, certainly by the Most High....Give to the godly man, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back his bread, and do not give it to him, lest by means of it he subdue you; for you will receive twice as

much evil for all the good which you do to him. For the Most High also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly. Give to the good man, but do not help the sinner (Sir 12:1-7).

In contrast to other teachings of the time, Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan casts as an unlikely hero, a class of persons who were often hated because of theological and historical rivalry. To orthodox Jews, Samaritans were more despised than Gentiles. Jesus not only made a Samaritan the hero but he also implicitly identified himself with one so despised.

Even more, Jesus calls us to love our enemies (Matt 5:44). This call takes us across religious, ethnic, cultural, racial and moral divides. No matter how broad the chasm, Christ's love extends there. Love is both centripetal and centrifugal: it both attracts people toward those who love and thrusts us out to love people wherever they live and whatever their stance.

Our love is based on God's love for us, "God is love" (I John 4:8), and thus we are to love those around us. Above all, we are to see God's love most clearly in His Son, Jesus, and His love for us. John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 15:13 says "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." We see the ultimate love of Christ on the cross. The cross is the distinctive element of New Testament love. We are to love as He loved.

Jesus' says in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Notice that Jesus commands us to love. It is the ideal to both feel and act lovingly. But we can not legitimately say to Jesus "I don't feel like loving this person and I can't fake it, so I won't." We need to love by an act of the will. We are called to obey His command to love. Note also that we are to love in the same self-sacrificial, agape way that He loved us (v34). It is through this kind of love that "all men" (or the world)

will know that we are His disciples. If we don't love in this fashion the world may not know the truth of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Paul summarized what it is to love in the great love chapter, I Corinthians 13. He argues that even if we have all knowledge, all gifts, and even if we give away all our goods and even more, become a martyr for the faith that these are all worth nothing without love. Love encompasses all virtues and lasts eternally. Paul also indicates that love is a fulfillment of the Law (Rom 13:8-10).

In I John, love is a proof of faith (I John 4:8). In fact, if we do not love, we do not know God. Whoever "loves God should love his brother also" (I John 5:21).

Love was often shown in the early church in a kiss of fellowship—"a holy kiss" (Rom 16:16) or a "kiss of love" (I Peter 5:14). Love became so associated with the early believers that the Lord's Supper was called the "love feast." Later Romans hear this terminology and assumed that immorality was going on in secret.

Love is to be the core of what believers hold to—love for God and neighbor. To sum up what we have discovered:

1. There are four words for love in Greek: stergo, phileo, eros, and agapao (verbal form).
2. Eros is not used at all in the New Testament and stergo only in combined forms.
3. Phileo is the word for love of a friend or relative, but is often used equivalently to agapao in Greek culture and in the New Testament.
4. The word agape is only found once in all of Greek literature but taken over by the New Testament as the central word for love.
5. Agape is sometimes used as love for the unlovely.
6. Jesus' Great Command (Matt 22:37-39) to love God and neighbor is a key summary of the whole Law.
7. Jesus unique interpretation broadened the meaning of neighbor to include those despised, excluded, and enemies.

8. Our love is to be modeled on God's love.
9. We are to love as Christ loved and the prime New Testament example of that is the cross.
10. Love is a command not just a matter of feeling.
11. Love is the highest virtue, even above faith and hope.
12. Love was central as shown in the "kiss of love" and the "love feast."