

Three Dimensions of Love

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The week prior to Jesus' crucifixion, commonly known as the Passion Week, was an emotionally charged period for the Son of God. Tuesday of that week was particularly controversial. Several members of various Jewish sects mounted argumentative assaults against Christ—with no success whatsoever, of course (see Mt. 22:15ff).

In one of these instances, a Pharisee lawyer framed a question which he doubtless believed, if answered, would provide some evidence for an indictment against the teacher from Nazareth.

“Which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

No doubt this legal expert felt this was a formidable question. The Jewish rabbis declared there were no less than 613 laws in the Old Testament. Of these, 248 were positive in thrust, while 365 were negative. They must have mused: “Which one of these would this so-called Messiah choose as the greatest?”

Christ, appealing to Deuteronomy 6:5, responded:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Jesus declared that this was the great and first commandment of the law. Further, citing Leviticus 19:18, the Lord said there is a second commandment like unto the first:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:36-40).

These two commandments, in fact, summarize the entire Old Testament.

All Religion Summed Up in Three Dimensions of Love

All human responsibility can be divided into three categories fundamentally.

First, there is man's **religious responsibility** to God—the duty we owe our Creator because of his nature (Psalm 18:3). God is a being of such wonder. He is worthy of glory and honor (Rev. 4:11). Mankind should willingly express his reverence for God in divinely-prescribed worship (Mt. 4:10). To neglect loving God is to be guilty of the most egregious form of ingratitude.

Second, there is one's **moral obligation**. This is the responsibility that human beings have to one another because every person bears the image of God and has intrinsic value.

Finally, by implication, this context suggests there is **personal obligation**—the duty that one has to self as a consequence of his own intrinsic worth.

And so the Savior indicated that the sum of man's earthly service is to: (1) love God, (2) love neighbor, and (3) love self.

The Nature of Love

But what did Christ mean when he suggested that we must exercise love in these dimensions? To answer this question, it will be helpful to consider the meaning of “love,” as that term is employed in the Greek Testament.

There are two common words in the Greek Testament, both of which are rendered “love” in the English translation. First, there is the verb **agapao**; then there is also **phileo**. These terms are the subject of some controversy among scholars. A few allege that these words have virtually the same meaning and are mostly employed as stylistic variations.

The vast majority of New Testament scholars, however, see a distinction between the terms.

Agapao has been described as the love of the intellect, a disposition that manifests itself in devotion to the object of its interest. By way of contrast, *phileo* is viewed as being a love of “the feelings, instinctive, warm affection” (Green 1907, 377).

Barclay argued that *agapao* is the love of the mind or the will; whereas *phileo* is the love of closeness and affection (1974, 20-21).

Nigel Turner observed that *phileo* has to do with “warm and spontaneous affection,” but *agapao* connotes “a calculated disposition of regard and pious inclination” (1981, 263).

Thayer suggested that *agapao* is grounded in admiration, veneration, and esteem, while *phileo* is prompted by sense and emotion (1958, 653).

And another scholar says that *agapao* “often conveys the idea of showing love by action” (Richardson 1950, 134).

Having noted this, we now observe that *agapao* is the word employed in the passage under consideration. We are to love God, our neighbor, and even ourselves with an *agapao*-type love.

How to Love God

It is less than amazing that so many profess belief in God but don't have the remotest understanding of what that really involves. For some, “God” is but a term used in profanity, or maybe a mere matter of passing conversation, or a spare-tire measure in a moment of crisis.

The truth is, loving God is a way of life. It is a devoted commitment that consumes one's very existence.

Paul caught the spirit of this challenge when he wrote: “For me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). For the great apostle, life simply had no meaning apart from serving God through Jesus Christ.

Genuine love is demonstrated in diligent obedience (Jn. 14:15; Gal. 5:6). Love for God is not a mushy, superficial emotion. It is a vibrant lifestyle of serious dedication.

“My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth” (1 Jn. 3:18).

But how does one learn to love God? Surely not by accident. Since we have neither seen the Creator face to face, nor heard his voice (Jn. 1:18), how can we love him?

The answer is simple. We **learn to love him** when we are exposed to the information about how much he loves us (cf. Eph. 3:18-19) and how that love has been expressed. “We love, because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19).

Love is infectious! And the motivating information is found in the Scriptures.

For example, God's love has been universally manifested to humanity (Jn. 3:16). Who, but God, loves so magnanimously? Moreover, his love is not abstract but is manifested concretely, in the gift of his Son.

“God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

Oh, such love! It is demonstrative (Gal. 1:4), unselfish (Phil. 2:5ff), inexpressible (2 Cor. 9:15), and unquenchable (cf. Rom. 8:35ff). Who can fathom it? It takes one's breath away.

But what does this disposition involve, practically speaking? First, as suggested above, it implies an attitude which respects the voice of God as evinced in biblical revelation. One of the crucial needs of the day is a reverence for the Scriptures. A disregard for the authority of the Bible is at the root of every problem in society, and within the church as well.

Second, a love for God is characterized by a **spirit of humility** which longs for guidance.

One of the interesting words of the New Testament is the term “obedience” (cf. Rom. 1:5; 16:26). This noun derives from the Greek term *hupakoe* (from *hupo*, “under,” and *akouo*, “to hear”). The word thus suggests the idea of sitting under a teacher and eagerly listening to his words with a view to implementing the instruction.

That is the very attitude one must have toward God as he considers the message of the Bible. The noble Bereans exemplified the right mode of thinking when they received the word with all “readiness of mind” (*prothumia* — Acts 17:11). The Greek word suggests forwardness of mind, and it depicts an attitude that is ready and willing to follow God’s will.

How to Love Others

It ought to be relatively easy to learn to love God in view of his marvelous benevolence. It is harder to learn to love our fellows. Enemies care nothing for us. Our neighbors occasionally treat us badly. Even family members can disappoint us.

How can we cultivate a love for those who are so marred by the effects of sin?

First, as mentioned earlier, one must recognize, based upon historical biblical revelation, that every human being is a product of divine creation, and therefore is a **being of value**.

“The Biblical teaching about man is not that man is a collection of chemical elements, not that man is part of the brute creation, but that man is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27)” (Barclay 1957, 308).

Paul, by inspiration, presented a tremendous challenge when he admonished that we are to do nothing through faction or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind “each counting other better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

How in the name of reason can we do that?

While it is a general truth that “all that a man hath will he give for his [own] life” (Job 2:4), Jesus declared: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13).

Tenney describes this as the “highest achievement of human love,” while noting that “divine love” goes beyond this (1948, 229; cf. Romans 5:8). The greatest lexicon on love in the history of human literature is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4ff. Read it and learn from it. It will never be surpassed. (See [The Challenge of Agape Love](#).)

We must observe, however, that love is not some anemic sentimentality that overlooks wickedness and error as though such do not exist. God loves us but he does not tolerate our rebellion. Love doesn’t excuse sin, but it does exhibit kindness to others—even enemies. And it is magnanimous to those who are trying to do right. Peter declares that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). The Christian is always eager to forgive his brother when that individual seeks such by means of the divinely-appointed method (cf. Lk. 17:3).

Can we possibly imagine how many human problems would be solved if only love were generously exercised? Would there be wars? Not a one. Would divorce ravage the land? It would not. And what of our prisons? They would be empty, crumbling in decay, for love does not rob, rape, or slaughter (cf. Rom. 13:8-10).

It is appropriate to observe that our love for others must attempt to pattern itself after the love that God has exhibited for us.

A certain snobbish Jew, in a verbal joust with Christ, dared to explore the meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself.” He frivolously asked: “Who is my neighbor?” For his trouble, he got the parable of the good Samaritan (see Lk. 10:25ff).

One’s neighbor is anyone—of whatever background—who needs his help. True love never discriminates. Is this more than we can bear?

How to Love Self

It is not wrong to love oneself. If one doesn't love self, it would be unreasonable to admonish man to love his neighbor as himself. But we seem to be living in an age when numerous people deprecate themselves.

Many appear to entertain very little if any sense of personal worth. Some feel they have little value because they were conceived out of wedlock. Others imagine that they are worthless because a parent abandoned them as a child. Others have been made to feel less than whole due to their racial, economic, or social status. Then there are those individuals who languish under the burden of having been molested in their youth. These sorts of things haunt the minds of troubled souls.

What the Christian needs to convey to such folks is the fact that they do have **intrinsic worth** regardless of the unfortunate circumstances of the past. Jesus declared that every human soul has value. It is worth more than the whole world (Mt. 16:26). Christ died for the potential salvation of every person (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Would he have given his life for that which is of no consequence?











Additionally, there is that self-depreciation that engulfs us when we sin. Our sensitive conscience is confronted with the awful reality that we have disappointed our holy Creator. Perhaps we disgraced our family and humiliated ourselves. Sin can immerse one in a terrible sea of personal disdain.

Reflect upon the agony of David when he contemplated his transgression with Bathsheba (Psa. 51). Again, though, we must remind ourselves that it was for this very reason that the Son of God entered this contaminated earthly environment. We can rejoice that we are able to find dignity, in spite of our sins, in the redeeming blood of the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29).

In light of Golgotha, any person can lift up his head with a smile on his face. Love yourself, because God does!

In the final analysis, the serious student must acknowledge that the New Testament opens up vistas of love never dreamed of by the most brilliant of human intellects. Let us revel in the sublimeness of this exalted theme, and seek to meet its challenge.

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