

AGAPE...THE GREATEST LOVE

Love is the greatest need in the world. The world has many songs about love and most films contain a romantic element. The English language has over 4 million words with 750,000 basic ones. Sadly, there is only one English word for love. Thus, there is a great misunderstanding of what love really means. A man may say he loves peanut bar, ice cream, hunting, sports, his dog and his wife, who would hope that his love for her means something more than those other things.

The modern western world gets its ideas of love mostly from Greek and Roman cultures. Our Hollywood celebrity culture exalts the rich, famous and the beautiful whereas the poor, unknown and the not so pretty are left to the sidelines. Here are examples from ancient Greece and Rome.

‘Only he who is deserving of love can be loved.’ - Aristotle

‘Love is for the lovely’. - Plato

How different this is from the view of love given in the Bible. The apostle John wrote much about love in his first letter. He used the word **agape**, which was a little used word in Greece, but the Christians took that word and made it something special.

‘He who does not love does not know God, for **God is love.**’ - 1 John 4:18

The reason the world does not know much about love is because they do not know much about God. **God does not have love, but is a love being, whose very nature is love.** We see this throughout the Bible, but it comes to us more clearly through the life and death of Jesus Christ. (There is a common misconception that the God of the Old Testament is less loving and more prone to anger and wrath but there are similar examples in the New Testament. Also, we often fail to realize God’s love is a holy love. He judged Israel’s enemies because he wanted to protect his people from the extreme idolatry and perversion of their neighbor nations, which had gone on for a long period of time. True love protects those they love.)

‘By this we know love, because he (Jesus) laid down his life for us.’- 1 John 2:16a

(Love is a verb, which is an action, not necessarily a feeling. In the garden of Gethsemane, we see that Jesus did not ‘feel’ like going to the cross but chose to do so as an act of the will.)

‘**Agape** has its perfect expression among men in the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian love is not an impulse from feelings. It does not always run with the natural inclinations. When agape is used of God, it expresses the **deep and constant love and interest of a perfect being towards unworthy objects**, producing and fostering in them a reverential love towards the giver and a desire to help others to seek the giver.’ - Vines Expository Dictionary

Agape, from which we get our English word **agony**, means the actual absorption of every part of our being in one great passion. This word agape has little to do with mere emotion. It indicates

love which **deliberately by an act of the will** chooses its object and through thick or thin, regardless of the attractiveness of the object concerned, goes on loving continually, eternally.

- Alan Redpath in the Royal Route to Heaven,

The real meaning of **agape** is **unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill**. If we regard a person with agape, it means that no matter what that person does to us, no matter if he insults us or injures us or grieves us, we will never allow bitterness against him to invade our hearts, but we will regard him with that unconquerable benevolence and goodwill which will seek nothing but his highest good. In fact, we can only have agape when Jesus Christ enables us to conquer our natural tendency to anger and to bitterness, and to achieve this invincible goodwill to all men.

- William Barclay

(Jesus was mocked, insulted and shamed as he hung naked on the cross, and yet he prayed that Father God would forgive them! Jesus had no bitterness or unforgiveness but was filled with love for sinners.)

Types of love in Greek

1. Eros - Romantic or physical, sexual love (Eros was Greek god of love and sexual desire. This type of love became so perverted that the New Testament writers never included it in their writings.)
2. Philia - Brotherly, friendship love (from which the city of Philadelphia gets its name)
3. Storge - Family love such as a parent for a child
4. Ludus - Playful flirtatious love
5. Philautia - Self love, care for self and self worth
6. Pragma - Enduring love that develops over time
7. Mania - Obsessive or possessive love
8. Agape - Selfless love

Eros love alone will not satisfy a person in relationships and yet it is often the only love some people strive for. It has its place in marriage but other types of love such as philia, pragma and agape are needed for a flourishing relationship.

Eros is impulsive while agape is freely spontaneous.

Eros is love by the lowly for the high but agape is love for the lowly by the high.

Eros uses others to achieve happiness while agape does good to another for unselfish reasons.

Eros seeks pleasure for self whereas agape is unconditional and seeks only to bless another

Agape Love

'No matter what you do to me or think of me, and although I may not be attracted to you, I will care for you so deeply that I will always seek your best good, whatever it costs me.'

-David Pawson