

**Love.** Because both the greatest commandments (cf. Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37-39) and the greatest sacrifice (cf. John 3:16) focus on love, it is safe to say that love is one of the most important concepts in understanding the biblical message. While American use of the English language has abused the concept of “love” (used for God, people, movies, food, cars, ad infinitum), the prevailing biblical notion is much more confined.

**Old Testament.** The Old Testament contains a multi-faceted understanding of love. Used of both God and man, love generally falls under either covenant love or sexual love.

**Covenant Love.** One of the most common terms for “love” in the OT is *ahab* (more than 230 uses as a verb and noun). Rather than carry many modern-day meanings of love as primarily emotional or romantic, *ahab* is saturated with the concept of covenant. Thus, expressions such as loyalty, commitment, and pledge convey this Hebrew term. This nuance is especially clear in the greatest commandment, which wraps one’s entire being into the all-important commitment to the Lord: “You shall love (*ahab*) the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5; cf. Matt 22:37-38). Much like the covenant commitment found in a wedding ceremony where a groom and his bride promise their “loyal love” to one another, so *ahab* communicates a strong-bonded love (unlike many contemporary marriages in the Western world, such a love is not [easily] broken). Furthermore, rather than focus merely on speaking “love,” *ahab* expresses itself best through actions of sacrifice and commitment.

Another common expression for covenant, or loyal, love is *hesed* (over 220 occurrences), which is saturated with meaning, including grace, loving-kindness, mercy, goodness, steadfast love, faithfulness, and more. A two-way kind of word, the Scriptures reveal that God may show *hesed* to man (cf. Lam 3:22) or man may be required to show *hesed* to God (Hos 6:6). A related term, *yadad*, refers to those “beloved” by Yahweh as His covenant people (Ps 127:2) and *habab* conveys the special “love” Yahweh has for the people He redeems (Deut 33:3; occurs only here).

Similarly, those who express a loyal “love” (*hasaq*) to Yahweh are protected as a part of His covenant commitment to them (Ps 91:14). Moreover, *raham* expresses loyal commitment and love, as spoken by David to Yahweh (Ps 18:1).

**Sexual Love.** Occurring over forty times, *dod* describes sexual, or passionate love, as found in the Song of Solomon. The terms “beloved” or “lover” often translate this word (cf. 1:13, 14; 2:3), and it may simply mean romantic “love” (1:2). Found often in the same song, the term *ra’ya* covers “companion,” especially of the beloved bride (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). Elsewhere, *agab*, too, conveys sexual love, but probably carries a nuance of lust, especially in contexts of prostitution or spiritual adultery (cf. Jer 4:30).

**New Testament.** Like the Old Testament, the New Testament focuses a good deal on both divine and human love. Unlike the Old Testament, however, the New Testament confines its language to two main word groups: *agape* and *philos*.

**Agape.** Usually defined as “unconditional love,” the noun *agape* (verb *agapao*) is the pre-dominant term the NT employs for “love,” occurring more than 300 times in all its forms. *Agape* is virtually equivalent to the OT *ahab*, emphasizing covenant loyalty (an unmerited, self-giving love) in many contexts. Examples are seen in such texts as Matthew 22:37, 39; John 3:16; Ephesians 5:25; 1 John 4:7-12; 4:16-5:4. Related words include “love feast” (Jude 12) and “beloved” (2 Tim 1:2; 1 John 2:7).

*Philos.* With some 100 occurrences, philos (or verb phileo) generally means “brotherly love,” “affection,” “friend,” “kiss,” or even “love” like agape. Philos normally conveys a *merited* love. Passages using a variant of this term include the following examples: familial love not to be greater than commitment to Christ (Matt 10:37); the spiritual kinship shared between members of the world (John 15:19) versus those belonging to Christ (16:27); Judas’ hypocritical kiss of betrayal (Mark 14:44); the greatest act of love is to die for one’s friends (John 15:13).

While the last example above carries overtones of agape love, an instance where agape and philos may be different occurs in John 21. In response to the Lord’s questions, “Do you love (agapao) Me more than these?” (vv. 15-16), Simon Peter responds each time by saying, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love (phileo) you” (vv. 15-17). While not evident in English, Peter’s response might indicate that he did not yet know the depth of the commitment he was making to the Lord. Jesus’ final question approaches Peter at his own level: “Do you love (phileo) Me?” (v. 17), to which Peter answers affirmatively (vv. 18-19 also support this view of Peter’s lack of understanding the depth of his commitment).

Thus, both agape and philos combine to present “love” in the New Testament as strong commitment made between spiritual family members. While storge (family affection) and eros (emotional or physical love [root for the English word “erotic”]) are common in Koine Greek, these terms never occur in the New Testament.

***Divine Love.*** One of God’s best-known communicable attributes is love, and 1 John 4:8, 16 even declare, “God is love.” Although love is not God’s chief attribute (holiness probably is, since it is the only super-superlative attached to God: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts,” Isa 6:3; cf. Rev 4:8), it is essential in understanding His plan to redeem fallen man. The Scriptures portray God’s love as both common and specific.

***Common Love.*** God’s common love is that which is directed at the whole world. Declaring God’s love for all sinners, the Apostle John penned perhaps the most well-known verse in all the Bible, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Here God loved the world so much that He sent His special, unique Son to die in their place (see ATONEMENT).

Echoes of John 3:16 are found in the following: “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins” (4:9-10; for “propitiation,” see ATONEMENT). While some may argue that these verses teach God’s love for His own children rather than the world, one need only realize that “Jesus Christ the righteous. . . is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*” (2:1-2). Clearly, the ultimate demonstration of God’s love for sinners is found in the cross of Christ (cf. Rom 5:6-8).

***Special Love.*** (1) God’s Love for Believers. Much like a school teacher can have a general love for children, yet a special love for her very own children, so it is with God. God’s special love for His children saturates the pages of Scripture. God has a special love for Israel (cf. Deut 4:37; Mal 1:2) and for believers. Writing to believers in general, John exclaims, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God” (1 John 3:1). This love is more than just a general love, for it results in becoming God’s children.

This love is an intimate, covenant kind of love between God and His people. The term “foreknew” (Rom 8:29; 11:2) conveys a special, intimate love that becomes the basis for God’s work of predestination, and could be translated into English as “those whom He fore-loved.” Such an understanding arises from the verb “to know” (yada‘) in certain Old Testament passages (where it can refer to covenant or sexual love, but with the focus on an intimate commitment). Adam “had relations” (literally, knew) his wife Eve (Gen 4:1), clearly involving intimacy. Eli’s sons “did not know the LORD” (1 Sam 2:12), meaning they lacked a personal commitment to Him. God says of Israel, “You only have I chosen (literally, known) among all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). Certainly, God recognized other people on the earth, but He had not set His covenant love on them like He had with Israel (cf. Gen 18:19; Ex 33:17; Ps 18:43; Pro 9:10; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:5). These passages confirm God’s special love for His people.

Moreover, this special love flows out most clearly from Christ’s death on the cross, for “we know love by this, that He laid down His life for us” (3:16), where “us” refers to believers. While the cross conveys a common love for all mankind, it also portrays the magnitude of God’s love for His own and motivates believers to reciprocate love—“we love, because He first loved us” (4:19).

God’s special love is also effective in bringing life to His children who were once dead spiritually—“God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph 2:4-5). God’s love, mercy, and grace worked hand-in-hand in spiritual birth.

A personal application of Christ’s love exists with sinners, calling them to trust in Christ. Paul reflects, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). Thus, divine love is not merely theoretical but communicable in the richest of senses.

Furthermore, Christ’s unique love for His own relates to His special revelation, which, unlike general revelation, is necessary for salvation: “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21; for the Spirit’s love for the believer, see Rom 15:30). Likewise, Christ connects His sacrificial love to His genuine disciples, whom He calls His “friends if you do what I command you” (15:14). Jesus even says, “The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father” (16:27).

(2) God’s Love for Himself. God’s love for His children simply reflects the love relationship between members of the Trinity. Just before Jesus’ crucifixion, He prayed to God the Father that believers might “be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me” (John 17:23). This love from Father to Son has always existed (“before the foundation of the world, v. 24). Moreover, Jesus Christ reciprocated that love to God the Father, proven through His obedience (cf. 14:31; 15:10).

Scripture also seems to indicate that God’s love for believers is tied to the abiding Spirit (cf. 14:16-17). Jesus taught His disciples that a day was coming when they would no longer see Him, but they could be assured of the unity between Father, Son, and believers. This assurance comes from “the Spirit of truth. . . [who] abides with you and will be in you.” In this context believers are those indwelt by the Spirit, who prove their love for Christ by their obedience to Him: “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (14:21).

**Human Love.** Though God sets the supreme standard for love, humans also express it (thus, one of God's *communicable* attributes). The negative side of human love is that fallen man wrongly loves sin (Jer 14:10). The positive side of human love should be directed toward God and others.

*For God.* The greatest commandment is to "love the LORD your God" completely (Deut 6:5; cf. Matt 22:37-38; Luke 10:27-28). The careful reader should note that nowhere does Scripture say you can simply love "God," as if anyone and everyone have the right to define Him on their own terms. Scripture is careful to name God as "the LORD" (the tetra-grammaton YHWH, or simply, Yahweh; see Ex 3:14; John 8:58; Rom 10:13 for the connections of "I AM" [1<sup>st</sup> person of hayah ("to be")] and "LORD" [literally, "He is;" 3<sup>rd</sup> person of hayah] with "Jesus Christ"). Therefore, one cannot claim that his love for Allah or Buddha fulfills God's greatest commandment, for one's commitment (love) must be with the LORD, the one true and living God (Jer 10:10).

*For Others.* While man's highest love should be reserved for God, he must also possess a benevolent spirit toward others. The second greatest commandment concerns this commitment to others' well-being: "you shall love [ahab] your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18; cf. Matt 22:39 for agape). Such love is not reserved strictly for family or friends, for "neighbor" is literally "near one," so love should be expressed to everyone encountered (cf. Luke 10:27-37 for the parable of the Good Samaritan). This love does not even exclude enemies, for Jesus commands the highest of ethics: "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44; cf. Rom 12:14-21).

When humans convey such love, they must remember that the command is to love others "as [one's self]." This comparison heightens the responsibility and commitment, because people care enough about themselves to eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, clothe themselves and seek shelter for protection, employ good hygiene, and more.

In light of loving one's neighbor, or near one, those nearest gives precedence to loving one's own family, for a man is in close proximity to his family quite often. God's Word says, "Husbands, love [agape] your wives, just as Christ also loved [agape] the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph 5:25; cf. Col 3:19). A Christian man's love for his wife must be an ongoing sacrificial commitment, for the command to "love" is present tense (continuous) and the comparison is Christ's supreme sacrifice of love. Similarly, wives must love their husbands (Tit 2:4).

Parents and children are also "near ones" that must be loved. Obviously, when Jesus says, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt 10:37), He does not mean humans should not love their families, rather it assumes familial love. The Christian's supreme love-loyalty must be with Christ in following after Him. Titus 2:4 also covers the love from mother to child.

In addition to biological kinship love, Christians must have a godly love for other believers. Jesus labels this spiritual connection as "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Christ's love for His own is the basis of the Christian's love for other believers. Likewise, God's love for sinners is motivating factor for Christian love—"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God;

and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:7, 19).

Finally, human love must also accompany Christian service. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 drives home a detailed description of a love that is necessary for expressing spiritual gifts. Although a popular passage at many wedding ceremonies, the love of 1 Corinthians 13 falls within the context of a believer exercising his gifts in the church (see 1 Cor 12-14). Thus, love must be the driving force in the way Christians serve each other. This Christian love for other believers must be sincere and fervent (1 Pet 1:22) while done in tolerance (Eph 4:2; cf. Gal 5:22-23). The writer of Hebrews blended these concepts of Christian love within the assembled church when he says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (10:24-25).

**Conclusion.** The Bible usually expresses “love” as either divine or human loyalty within a familial relationship. God expressed love-to-the-max in sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for sinners. Such a love serves to call people to return that loving commitment in two ways: (1) to God through Christ and (2) to others because of Christ.

### **Bibliography**

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