

Thinking of Love

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Valentine's Day is tomorrow. Men, you knew that, right? If you forget, I'm sure you will be reminded by that special lady in your life. Valentine's Day is a day to express our love for that special someone, to show how much we care for them and appreciate them. Personally, I think it was a day created by Hallmark to make more money. But seeing that it's here to stay, we might as well enjoy it.

Our English word "love" encompasses a variety of ideas and extremes. We love our spouse, our girlfriend or boyfriend, our dog, our favorite foods, a good movie...I could go on and on. And even though we use the same word to express varying degrees of affection for people or things, we understand there's a difference.

The Greeks used 5 different words for love to distinguish between the different kinds of love. We're probably familiar with at least 3 of them. The Greek word *eros* (from which we get our word "erotic") is the word that we would probably use the most on Valentine's Day. This is the sensual or longing type of love that a husband and wife have for each other, though it does not have to be sexual in nature. Simply put, it's a romantic love.

The word *philia* denotes a general type of love, such as between family, friends, members of a community, etc. This word was also used for enjoyment of an activity. I love (*philia*) Auburn football, but I don't love (*eros*) Auburn football.

Finally, the word that is most frequently used in the New Testament for love is *agape*. While it had a broader meaning in ancient Greek and was used interchangeably at many times with *philia*, in Christian terminology, it came to mean an unconditional, self-sacrificing kind of love. It's the highest and purest form of love, and as described in 1 Cor. 13, it's the kind of love that is not dependent upon reciprocal actions. It only has the interest of the other person in mind, regardless of how it is received.

It is this kind of love that God showed us. *"But God demonstrates His own love (agape) toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8). In this verse and the verses preceding it, you can see why it's described as an unconditional, self-sacrificing love. God doesn't only love certain people. He loved all of us, even though we were "ungodly" and even though we were "sinners". And because of that love, He sent the Christ to be a sacrifice on our behalf.

John said it this way: *"In this the love (agape) of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love (agape), not that we loved (agapao) God, but that He loved (agapao) us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins"* (1 John 4:9-10).

Doesn't it make sense that if God loved us in this way, that we should love our Christian brethren in the same way? After all, if God loves our brothers, then we should too. *"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:11).

But it's not enough to just say we love each other. That love must be demonstrated. And it needs to be demonstrated to everyone, not just the ones we are naturally drawn to. Not just our group of friends that we normally socialize with. We typically are eager to show our love when someone needs some physical help. But sometimes, this love is demonstrated by actively looking out for the spiritual interests of others. Have you noticed someone not faithfully attending the services? Call them. Have you noticed someone that has become discouraged? Talk to them. Have you noticed someone saying or doing something that a Christian shouldn't? Confront them in a spirit of love.

Not only does it make sense to love our brethren in the same way that God loves them, but doesn't it also make sense to love God because of the love He has showed us? "*We love (agapao) Him because He first loved (agapao) us*" (1 John 4:19). When someone goes out of their way to do something extremely kind for you, it's natural to want to return the favor, to show them you appreciate what they did. Jesus said, "*If you love (agapao) me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15).

Part of agape love is whole-hearted devotion, as is seen in the greatest commandment: "*You shall love (agapao) the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*" (Matt. 22:37). This is a love that does not have self in mind. If you truly love God in this way, then you'll deny yourself and follow Him. You'll quit being selfish and giving in to your own desires, and submit yourself to His will. After all that He's done for you, after the love that He has shown, isn't it your reasonable service to be a living sacrifice for Him (Rom. 12:1)?