

Love is ...

Modern society has been filled with books, television shows, movies, and most famously in the 1970s, a cartoon strip dealing with “Love is.” Each of these sources tries to explain what love is, with none of them agreeing exactly. Current dictionaries try to define love, also with mixed results: “an intense feeling of deep affection,” “a great interest and pleasure,” or “a deep romantic or sexual attachment.” It is no wonder that when questioned about what love is, many people give confused answers. Is it an emotion? Is it something that I just feel without being able to help it?



Truly, there is emotion involved in love, but it is not just emotion. Certainly, there is affection as well as attachment that may be involved in love as well. Again, love is not just attachment or deep affection or romance. In fact, from a spiritual perspective, it might be said that all of these things are secondary to what love is.

Thinking in Biblical terms, some people may still be a bit confused when they hear teachers and preachers talk of the different “words” for love Scripture. In the koine Greek language alone, there are multiple words for love with each having a slightly different, but sometimes overlapping, meaning for love. The two most common Greek words are: **agape** (active good will), and **phileo** (fondness, friendship). The distinction between the two is not always clear cut and sometimes they overlap.

In order to avoid confusion, perhaps it is best to simplify the approach to love. Stripping away all of the discussion that is attached to the cause, the feelings, and the attachments of love, one is left with something so plain, it cannot be misunderstood. Love is a command and a choice. We are commanded to love in the sense of active good will and also in the sense of affection and friendship. We then must choose if we will obey these commands. The command and the choice are primary. The emotions and attachments are secondary. Without a doubt, the feelings will intensify when we make the choice to follow the command.

The Godly Principle

Sometimes people forget that the commandment to love is a long established Godly principle. It is often said that under the old covenant given to the people of Israel, that God was a God of punishment and war, but that under the covenant through Christ, He is a God of love. Understand this—He is the same God. He has always demanded love. The law given to Israel was inextricably tied to love. In **Deuteronomy** alone, the phrase, “*love the LORD your God,*” is found at least eight times (**Deuteronomy 6:5; 11:1,13,22; 13:3; 19:9; 30:6,16**). Moreover, also tied to the law was the command to love your neighbor. “*You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the*

LORD” (**Leviticus 19:18**). Notice that the love of our neighbor arises from the acknowledgment of God.

Jesus pointed to this concept when He was tested by being asked the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus responded, “*YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.*’ *This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*” (**Matthew 22:35-40**). You may also notice that the “backbone” of the law, the ten commandments, is arranged exactly in that manner. The first four commandments are directly about love for God. The following six commandments are directly related to how we treat our fellow man.

Who Do You Love?

The principle has been established that we are to love God. So then, naturally, we are commanded to love Jesus, God dwelling among us (**1Corinthians 16:22**). We are also commanded to love our neighbor (**Mark 12:31**). We are even commanded to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**).

Our earthly families are important to God. Husbands are to love their wives (**Ephesians 5:25,28-29**). Wives are to love their husbands (**Titus 2:4**). Parents are to love their children (**Titus 2:4**).

Our spiritual family in Christ is important to God, too. We are to love one another as Christ loved us (**John 13:34**). We are to be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love (**Romans 12:10**). It is to be a fervent love from the heart (**1Peter 1:22**).

The command to love will be evidenced by the display of a true, heartfelt, affection towards another. since this is something that is commanded, it must be something we can develop if we are falling short.

How Do You Love?

To learn how to love we must have a teacher. There is none better than God. He is love (**1John 4:8,16**). He teaches us to love one another (**1Thessalonians 4:9**). He set the example in that He sent His Son (**1John 4:9-10**). This is how to love.

Jesus was willing to die for us (**Ephesians 5:2**). He also set the example in how He loved His disciples (**John 11:3,5; Jn 13:1,34; Jn 13:23; 20:2**). This is how to love.

Paul taught Christians about walking in love (**Ephesians 5:1-2**) and taught husbands how to love their wives (**Ephesians 5:25-33**). He himself practiced brotherly love (**Philippians 4:1**). This is how to love.

Peter also taught us to love one another (**1Peter 1:22; 4:8**). He taught that we were brothers (**1Peter 2:17; 3:8**). He, too, like Paul and so many other early disciples, practiced brotherly love (**2Peter 3:15**). This is how to love.

Today teaching how to love is vital for all Christians. Older women should be capable of teaching the younger women (**Titus 2:3-4**). Even young Christians can set an example of how to love (**1Timothy 4:12**; **2Thessalonians 1:3**).

Choices Have Consequences

All choices have consequences. The consequences depend upon the choice that is made. When a bad choice is made, then the expectation should be for undesirable consequences. When the people of Israel made the choice to turn from God, the consequences were disastrous—they were swept away. *“The wind will sweep away all your shepherds, And your lovers will go into captivity; Then you will surely be ashamed and humiliated Because of all your wickedness”* (**Jeremiah 22:22** see also **1Samuel 12:25**).

To avoid disastrous consequences we need to acknowledge any deficiency and be willing to relearn love. We need to look to the examples of the Father, Jesus, the apostles, early Christians, and our own brothers and sisters in Christ today. Take the initiative to practice love. Make the choice to follow the command to love, and the feelings and attachments will develop naturally.

We have been purified for the very purpose of having unequivocal, affectionate love for God and for one another. Never, ever substitute love for self (**2Timothy 3:2**) nor for the world. *“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever”* (**1John 2:15-17**). Remember what Jesus said: *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”* (**John 14:15**). Remember what love is.

—S. Scott Richardson Sr.