

LOVE

The English language fails miserably to fully express the variety of meanings for the Biblical word “love.” Confusion is the inevitable result. When the Bible refers to “love,” the meaning is very specific, depending upon the exact term used by the author and the context in which it is found.

For instance, the Greek words **ερωσ** (Pronounced with long “o”: eros), **φειλω**, (Pronounced with long “o”: phileo), and **αγαπαω / αγαπη** (Pronounced with long “o” and Pronounced with “e” as long “a”: agapao / agape), all mean “love” in English. However, they each have unique and specialized meanings in Greek. Without knowing which Greek word the author chose, simply seeing the English word “love” written in the Bible conveys very little and will most likely result in misleading casual readers into false conclusions.

Eros conveys a sense of passion and desire for another. **Phileo** is a love full of care and concern for other humans. However, **agape** is a form of love which includes none of the magical quality of eros and lacks the warmth of phileo. Agape relates not to outward directed affection, but to an inward attitude. Although the word agape has a somewhat uncertain etymology, scholars consistently interpret it as:

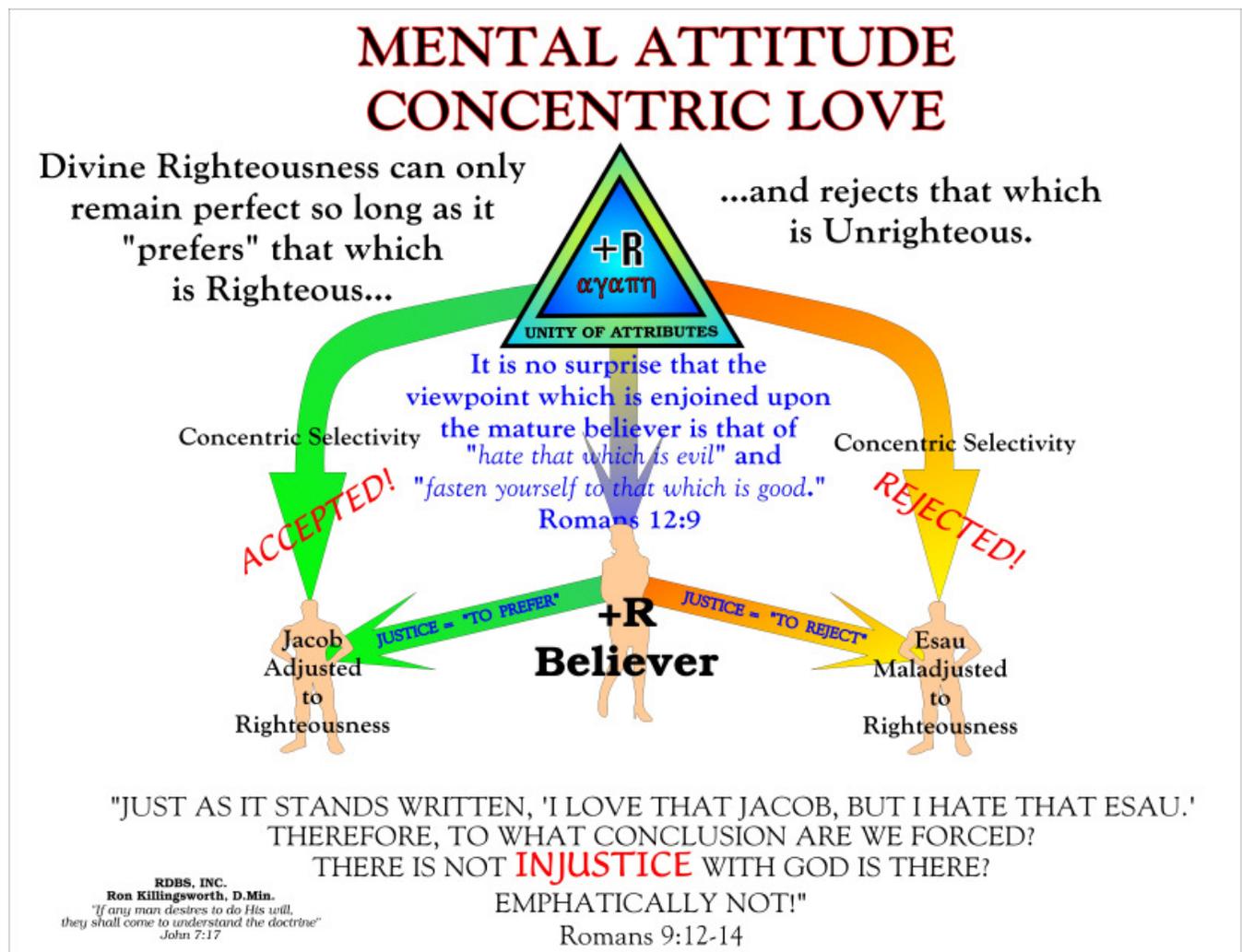
- to prefer
- to set one good or aim above another
- to esteem one person or thing more highly than another.

A thorough study of the word and its various uses throughout Scripture shows **agape** to convey a sense of *strict mental attitude respect, reverence, selectivity and reasoned attachment* based on the worthiness of the object in question.

The interpretation, for example, of any passage such as John 3:16 must always be precluded by understanding and applying the principles of the perfect integrity of God, which integrity consists of His eternal perfect norms and standards of Righteousness and an absolute enforcement level of Justice. Apart from the faithful application of the principle of divine integrity, meaning that integrity can never change through subjectivity, emotion, passivity or omission, to all interpretations of God’s “doing business” with the human race, it is inevitable that one will ascribe to God violations of His own norms and standards of Righteousness and compromise on the absolute “no respecter of persons” enforcement level of Justice. For instance, with reference to John 3:16, the basic study of systematic theology

reveals that God could never “love,” in the conventional sense, the unrighteous cosmos (world), and remain perfect God. Careful examination of the verse reveals that, in fact, all the action of God goes toward the perfectly righteous Son, not toward the unrighteous world. God the Father sent the Son who did all of the work of dying on the Cross, hence, Grace in action, for the benefit of the human race that simply believe. John 3:15-16, 36

Knowing the true meaning of agape sheds new light upon our view of God’s love when we realize that it is this very term which is most commonly used to indicate His attitude toward mankind. Certainly, it is not without significance that the Biblical writers chose this specific term to describe God’s inward attitude of selectivity directed toward mankind. A primary example of agape’s use as the term for God’s “love” is found in Romans 9:13 when Paul states that God “hated” Esau, but “loved” Jacob. Translating this verse from the original Greek reveals that God does not actually “hate” or “love” in a human sense. Paul is ascribing human traits to God as a means of using language which will accommodate his readers’ ability to understand his point. His use of the term agapao for God’s “love” tells us that there is an inward standard of *selectivity* at work as God formulates His attitude toward man. This difference in the Divine Mental Attitude or selectivity is demonstrated no less in the fact that He sends some to Heaven and some to Hell. (Example: The two thieves at the Cross.) The meaning of agape tells us that His attitude will be based upon the worthiness of the object in question - mankind in either adjustment or maladjustment to His norms and standards of Righteousness. In the example above, God recognizes the righteous attributes in Jacob which *allow* Him to view Jacob with agape - selective love - for blessing. The same agapao selectivity *excludes* Esau for blessing because he lacks the characteristics which would allow God’s perfect Righteousness and Justice to view him as acceptable.



God's Righteousness and Justice combine to form the attribute of Holiness.

[The Scriptures declare the Holiness of God: Exodus 19:2; 1 Samuel 2:2; Job 15:15; Psalm 22:3; 47:8; 111:9; Isaiah 6:3; 57:15; Revelation 6:10; 15:4, etc. Therefore, because God is Holy, the love of God of necessity possesses perfect integrity, which includes *incorruptible* Justice and *immutable* Righteousness. God's attribute of Love never operates apart from His other attributes, including Righteousness and Justice, hence, Holiness. Consequently, because God is Holy, His Love can only function in perfect respect and honor of the integrity of His Righteousness and Justice - divine selectivity. Therefore, as will be demonstrated herein, if God honors the true integrity of His Righteousness and Justice, then He could never, in the conventional manner of speaking, "love" fallen or sinful mankind. For example, Isaiah 64:6 states that the best that mankind could ever produce is "unrighteousness," therefore, from the Divine Viewpoint the best that mankind could ever do or produce from his Creature Feature Factors is unacceptable and repugnant to God's Righteousness and Justice, hence, Holiness.]

God's Holiness serves as the unchanging foundation for His selectivity - His agape or love toward mankind. This Holiness cannot be swayed by sentimentality and is not influenced by the human trait of subjectivity. On the contrary, Holiness dictates that God view man and act toward man with complete objectivity.

God's objectivity and discernment, based upon absolute Holiness, define the nature of His love toward mankind. These divine standards also form the basis for God's commandments governing man's love toward mankind. Paul says in Galatians 5:14, "*For the whole law is fulfilled in one word - you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Here, Paul is teaching the principle of agape as it applies to humanity. He is not saying that we should display universal warmth and affection toward our neighbors. Instead, by using the term agape, he is telling us to use *selective reasoning and discernment* in our relationships with other human beings. This is not politically or religiously correct, but like it or not, this is what the word means in the Greek. Our own love for humanity must be selectively based upon humanity's worthiness to be loved. As with God's attitude toward Jacob and Esau, we must also display selectivity and judgment toward men. If men fail to meet the standards of God's Holiness, not only can God not "love" them or have an intimate, familiar or cozy relationship with them, neither should we. By studying God's Word and learning what behaviors and attitudes constitute the norms and standards of Righteousness, we can utilize the concept of agape in deciding whom to "love" and whom to "hate." We must use the discerning and selective characteristics of agape in choosing those who are worthy to receive the full force of the human warmth and affection defined by eros and phileo.

God's "love" toward mankind and Paul's order to "love" our neighbors do not involve warmth or passion being conveyed indiscriminately upon all humanity. Instead, both God's "love" and man's "love" are part of an unchanging set of standards and an objective attitude of selectivity. The attitude of agape, in combination with all of God's perfectly synchronous attributes, drive His intellectual decisions to curse and bless mankind as His perfection demands. The standards of agape should also dictate how we view humanity, form individual relationships and direct our "love" toward other human beings.

LEXICAL DOCUMENTATION

[Gehard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964) 1:21-55]

The basic concept of the meaning of the word-group “αγαπη/αγαπαω” lies in the “Pre-biblical Greek” usage of these terms. Αγαπη relates “...the inward attitude in its meaning of ‘seeking after something,’ or ‘desiring someone or something.’” [p.36] “The specific nature of αγαπαω becomes apparent at this point. ‘Ερωσ is a general love of the world seeking satisfaction wherever it can. Αγαπαω is a love which makes distinctions, choosing and keeping to its object.” The parent term for the New Testament usage of αγαπη/αγαπαω is the Hebrew אָהַב {Pronounced: aw-hab’}. אָהַב is defined as the “...love extolled in the Old Testament (which) is a jealous love *which chooses one among thousands*, (emphasis added) and holds him with all the force of passion and will, and *will allow no breach of loyalty* (emphasis added) ... the same exclusive motif asserts itself in the principle of love for neighbor. It is a love which makes distinctions, which chooses, which prefers and overlooks. It is not a cosmopolitan love embracing millions ... neighbourly love for the native Israelite is concentric ... the substantive of “אָהַב” corresponds to the Greek αγαπη ... the whole group of words associated with agapan is given a new meaning by the Greek translation of the Old Testament.”

[Richard C. Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 57-59.]

“Αγαπαν” corresponds to the Latin “diligere,” both of which pertain “more to judgment” than to “innermost feeling of the soul” as do the Latin “amare” and the Greek “φειλω.” “Xenophon ... shows how the notions of respect and reverence are always implied in αγαπαν, though not in φειλειν.” “Ερος, εραν, and εραστης never occur in the New Testament ... their absence, which is significant, ... had become associated with the idea of sensual passion ... rather than employing one of them, the writers of Scripture created a new word αγαπη ... not merely a sense of need, emptiness, and proverty and a longing after fullness...”