

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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The Prime Place of Love

The central place of love in the New Testament

St Paul describes love as being supreme, everything else is superfluous in its absence: **'if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong .. though I have the power of prophecy .. though I have faith to move mountains .. without love I am *nothing*'**

St. Paul then gives love its positive attributes, **'always patient and kind .. never rude .. never seeks its own advantage .. never takes offence nor stores up grievances .. does not rejoice at wrongdoing .. always makes allowances ..'**

In St. John's first letter, love is first emphasised in general terms that underlie our responsibilities: **'love one another'** and **'whoever does not love remains in death'** and **'our love must not be mere words .. but something active and genuine'** (ch.3).

Then, in a short but profound argument, St John describes the love that God is and links God's love for us with the love that we must, in turn, show for others (ch.4). St. John bases the requirement to show love in terms of a proper commitment to God:

'everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God'

St. John makes clear the extent of God's love for us: **'this is the revelation of God's love for us, that he sent His only son into the world that we might have life through him'** and **'love consists in this, it is not we who loved God but God who loved us and sent his son to expiate our sins'**.

But in like manner, then, we must in turn love others, **'anyone who says he loves God but hates his brother is a liar .. This is the commandment we have received from Him, whoever loves God must also love His brother'**

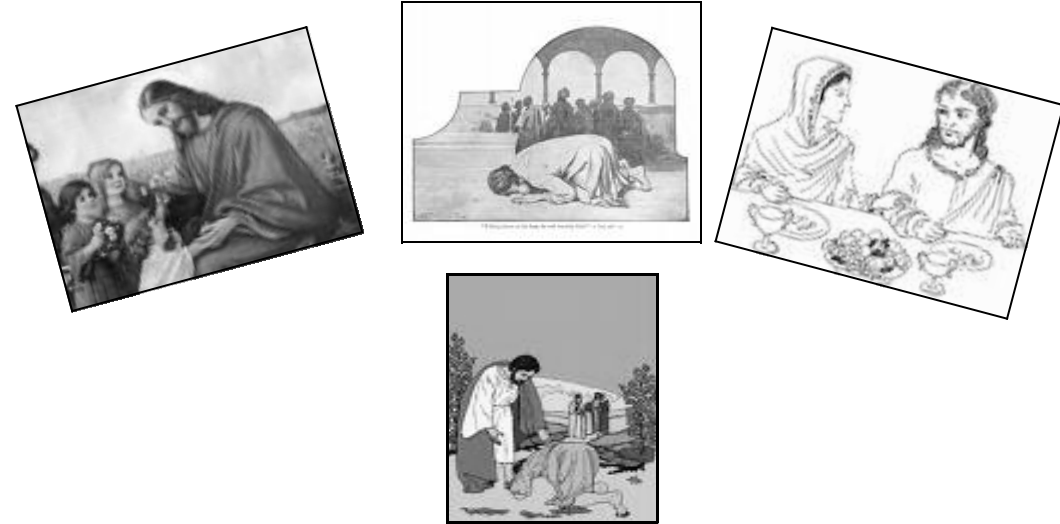
I make no apologies for recording here what you could have read for yourself in the Bible, because these words are the essence of our faith as an active faith. As such, these words should be branded in our hearts. Yet, as I say this, I instinctively feel my own failures while simultaneously recognising the essential truth revealed. In Zen Buddhism, eternal truths are learnt by the Master posing riddles for his student to ponder over. One such riddle goes: **'What have we got so much of that we can give it all away to others, and still have as much of it left as we started with?'**

I think you now know the answer to that one.

What Does All this Mean for Us?

As a martial artist for over forty years, and instructor in several arts, I can honestly say that I respect all people but fear none. However, one thing I do fear greatly is that moment of judgement when I am asked how I can prove my love of God by showing the love I have given to others. I am sure, like you all, that I can point to several good deeds in my life (I should hope so!) but will that be sufficient? Do I really think that I have shown to others the maximum love I could have done? No, in all honesty, I know that I have not. That is why I fear that moment.

But let us be positive, with a real trust in God who already knows our weaknesses, and resolve to improve. We can try to show real Christian love, I think, in two ways. In a 'big' way by supporting charities and good causes financially and sharing any good fortune we may be lucky to have with others (without trying to buy our salvation) and in numerous 'little' ways. What do I mean by 'little ways'? Well, they are definitely not so little in practice. I mean **always** being courteous and kind to people, **keeping** our temper, being **cheerful** even when we don't feel like it, **never** being nasty about people (especially about those we instinctively don't like), and **doing** good deeds selflessly when we can. But, overall, I think our responsibility to show love can be summarised in these few words: **'always doing what is right .. and walking humbly with God'** (Micah.ch.6).



Questions for Reflection

1. What is the most important type of love?
2. Why is love important in Christianity?
3. How do I know if I have the type of love God wants?
4. Is it possible to love someone and dislike them at the same time?

“Love, Love, Love, All you Need is Love”

The refrain from the famous Beatles song exemplifies the kind of love that can transform society. This song is very wise in the deepest sense of that word, as it reflects what most civilised people realise in their hearts to be instinctively true. However, it also reveals a bizarre contradiction - a lot of the time there is scant evidence of love being central to an individual's life let alone society's. Why is this? To help address this problem, let us take a journey into the different ways the word love is used, and then into its NT meaning and importance.

What do we mean by Love?

The word love is used in many different ways: we say God loves us (God chose the Hebrews out of love, Deut. ch.7) we say we love God (Psalm 18); we say we love our husband, or wife (Isaac loves Rebecca, Genesis ch.24); we say we love our children (Jacob's love of Joseph exceeded his love for his other sons, Genesis ch.37), or some other relative or a friend (David's lament over the death of Jonathan his dearest friend, whom he loved more than any woman, 2 Samuel ch.1); we say we love fish and chips or a pint of beer, or a holiday in Majorca; we say we love our dog or cat; we say we love to see the sun setting or the colours of autumn. And so on. We know that when we use 'love' in these ways that it has a different meaning in each, some of the meanings are much more intense than others, and some of them really just meaning a strong liking for something. And what kind of love is meant in the divine command **‘to love thy neighbour’** (Leviticus ch.19)?

Can love be meaningfully separated into love associated with people, and all other types of love? Should love be separated into deep emotional love and all other types of love? Should love associated with people be more important than love of any other kind and, where people are concerned, should deep emotional love be treated as more important than other types of love for people? These are important questions, and perhaps we do not give ourselves sufficient time to come to meaningful conclusions about them. But, for our salvation, surely the most important type of love is that required of us by God? So, let us restrict our search to finding out what that may be.

Jesus and Love

It is important to recognise that in Greek there are several words for love to recognise its different nuances: Eros is sexual love and does not appear in the NT; Philia is the love shown in friendship; Agape is a rarer word and is chosen to reflect the unique nature of the Christian concept of love. Jesus centralises love in his message of salvation: Jesus quotes Deuteronomy ch.6 to say that the greatest commandment is to love God, and quotes Leviticus ch.19 to say that love of neighbour is the next most important one. Everything hangs on these two precepts (Matthew ch.22) (N.B. 'Agape' is the Greek word used here). Interestingly, the quote from Leviticus actually has a very restrictive meaning in its proper context. It was part of a series of instructions aimed at maintaining social cohesion within an established Hebrew agricultural society, where people would be living in close proximity to one another, and no longer as nomads. As such, it was only intended to apply to a local grouping, although perhaps also to all Hebrews, **‘nor bear grudge against any of your race’**. In any event, it was not meant to apply to non-Hebrews. That is why Jesus was asked to clarify what was meant by 'neighbour', and which prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan, widening the scope of 'neighbour' in a significant way (Luke ch.10).



Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had presented himself as completing the Law of the OT:

‘do not think that I have come to abolish the Law but to perfect it’ (Matthew ch.5).

He made a series of statements beginning **‘You have heard it said ... but I say to you’** in order to elaborate what was now expected of people. In this context, he extends the command to **‘love your neighbour’** to **‘love your enemies’**.

In Luke's Gospel (ch.6), in the same context, Jesus specifically outlines ways in which we can love our enemies. This provides an important clue to what forms the basis of the Christian concept of love. It is clear that it is **a practical love**, it concerns good actions towards others. It does not have to include or require positive feelings towards others. After all, how can we actually *feel* positive emotions towards people who are wicked to us, or whom we do not actually like? How we feel does not appear to matter, we do not have to actually *like* people as long as we are good to them. Ultimately, all that really matters is how we **treat** people. After all, most people who have children love them and would do anything to help them, but that does not mean that they like everything they do or agree with every choice they make. Far from it! It may even be the case that, while loving their children, parents at the same time may not particularly like who they have turned out to be when they become adults.

All this is not to say that some really good people are not also able to feel emotional love towards those who have done evil to them. It is just that such people are, I think, very much the exception. But, then again, saints are the exception anyway!

In St John's Gospel, Jesus' message about love reaches a sublime level. His emphasis is on a love that is selfless, one dedicated to others. In the parable of the Good Shepherd (ch.10) Jesus states:

‘the good shepherd is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep’

At the Last Supper St. John shows Jesus, as master, washing the feet of his servants to show a humble and practical side to love (ch.13), while after the imagery of the true vine (ch.15) he restates the ultimate expression of love:

‘no greater love has a man than to lay down his life for his friends’.

But Jesus is not just speaking about himself. He makes this clear when he continues:

‘I give you a new commandment, to love one another as I have loved you’.

It is clear that Jesus is defining love in terms of **acts of service** to others.

In Praise of Love

No NT consideration of love would be complete without an outline of the beauty and emotion of St. Paul's description of love in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch.13) and the doubly moving summary in St. John's first letter, the sentiments of which he restated in his short second letter where he stressed love as being central to a Christian life:

‘in our life of truth and love, we shall have grace, faithful love .. ‘to love is to live according to his commandments .. to live a life of love’

