

## 8. Love

Similar to some of the other “Little Words,” an entire book could be devoted to the verb “love,” as well as to the noun “love.” There are few words as prominent or as important in the New Testament.

It is relatively easy to see the close relation of “love” to most of the preceding chapters. We should seek to be more effective channels for the expressing of God’s love to men and women, boys and girls, created in the image of God and whose image can be restored through their union with the resurrected Christ.

Through love for God we can and will come to share more completely the fact that God is our loving heavenly Father and that He wants to be the Father of all. Also, the more fully we become channels for the expressing of His love to people—good and bad—saved and unsaved—lovable and unlovable—the more fully and perfectly we will reveal His image to others. Also, the more we love people and the deeper our conviction of having been sent by the Father, the broader, deeper, and more inclusive will be our love for all kinds of people.

And surely it is not difficult for us to understand the closeness of the relations of love in our walk for and with the Lord. As followers of the Risen Christ, we should walk in love. Our life or walk in the home, as neighbors and friends, where we work and play, where we worship should be a walk of love—a love expressed by word of mouth at times but always by the spirit revealed in our relationships.

The preceding is enough of a review to underscore the close relationship of the chapters in these studies of “Little Words.” Also, let me repeat once again that chapters could be written on the noun forms of several of these little words. That is certainly true for the word “love.”

## Prevalence

The verb form of “love” (*agapao*) is found approximately 120 times in the New Testament; *agape*, the noun form, is found approximately 100 times. It may surprise some readers to discover that the other prominent word for love, *phileo*, is found only about 25 times in all the New Testament. A word closely related to *agapao* is *agapetos*, which is found approximately 60 times in the New Testament.

*Phileo* is variously translated and has a number of other words closely related to it. For example, when Judas said, “Whosoever *I shall kiss*, that is he,”<sup>1</sup> the word translated “shall kiss” is a form of *phileo* (Matthew 26:48, KJV; Mark 14:44, KJV; Luke 22:47). There are other words closely related to *phileo*. *Phileo* usually, and always in some translations, is translated “friendship.” *Agape* is frequently translated “charity,” particularly in older versions such as the King James Version. In former days “charity” was practically a synonym for “love.”

Really, love in some form is a, if not the most, distinctive concept of the Bible with the single exception of references to God, Christ, Holy Spirit, and terms identified with or closely associated with them. As we shall discuss a little more in detail later, “love” is one quality that God is equated with, or possibly it is better to say that “love” is equated with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

The prevalence of “love” cannot be determined entirely by the frequency of the appearance of the words in the original manuscripts translated “love.” Love permeates every portion of the Scriptures where the redemptive purpose of God is central. This explains the fact that love as a word or an idea is more prevalent in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. In the latter it is more evident in the hidden and ultimate purpose of God than in the immediate expression of that purpose. Although the love of God is not as central in the Old Testament as in the New Testament, His love and redemptive purpose is the underlying and unifying theme of both Testaments. His continuing purpose has been and is to redeem men and women, boys and girls. That redemptive purpose is an expression of His love and is inclusive of all mankind.

### **Inclusiveness**

There are a number of additional ways to express the inclusiveness of God’s love. It possibly should be stated in the beginning that the inclusiveness of the love of God requires a response from the ones He loves. At least there must be a response for one to receive the blessings that come from—and only from—the fact that God loves us. He may and does continue to love the ones who fail to respond to that love, but He does not and cannot bring the blessings into those lives that He would like to give.

Let us further examine the inclusiveness of love by looking at some of the exhortations regarding love.

#### **1. To love God**

Of the various passages stressing love for God, none is more pointed and more familiar than that contained in Matthew 22:36-40. These brief verses contain one of the greatest summaries to be found anywhere in the Scriptures concerning the requirements of a basically right relation to God.

When the Pharisees realized that Jesus had silenced or “muzzled” the Sadducees, they had a lawyer ask Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law” (Matt. 22:36)? And in reply, Jesus gave that matchless summary, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 23:37). He then said, “This is the great and first commandment” (Matt. 23:38). It is my judgment that being the matchless Teacher He was, He paused a short time for emphasis and added, “And a second is like it [like it in nature—a commandment of love and comparable to it in importance; neither one is complete without the other]: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 23:39). Then Jesus concluded, “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 23:40]. In other words, these two commandments, neither of which would be complete without the other, not only summarize and fulfill all the requirements of the law but also the basic teaching of the prophets.

## **2. Love for the brotherhood**

Let us use one passage of Scripture to expand somewhat on the love we should have for those in the Christian fellowship or brotherhood, with the understanding that “brotherhood” is inclusive of male and female, young and old—all who are a part of the local church family and the larger Christian family. Just as is true in human relations in general—where the children of God can have a particularly close and meaningful love and relationship to the immediate members of their families, they should have a somewhat comparable love for all men and women, boys and girls, and for these regardless of class, color, or condition of life.

Love for those of the Christian family should express itself in specific helpful ways when needed. It is James who compares love that does not express itself in helpful needed service to faith without works. He asks these questions:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his [or that] faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled [“Good luck to you, keep yourselves warm and have plenty to eat,” NEB] without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

Some Christians need to be reminded from time to time that James is a part of the inspired Word of God and contains some great truths that many of us as individual Christians and as churches need. For example, the tendency to neglect the people who hurt, who are under-privileged in our relatively affluent society, is entirely too prevalent. Our love as Christians and Christian churches is not the kind that our Father expects us to share with others unless it is shared with those who really need it.

### **3. Love for neighbor**

The neighbor we are exhorted to love may be a Christian brother close by or afar. On the other hand, the neighbor may simply be a potential brother in Christ. But at least he is a human brother. And incidentally, “neighbor” may refer to one next door, one in the same general neighborhood or community. “Neighbor” is determined, to a considerable degree, by our real or potential capacity to reach out to others and identify with them as a neighbor wherever they may live, whatever their condition of life.

Luke 10:25-28 is probably Luke’s report of the same incident recorded in Matthew 22:34-40. It is possible, however, that the question was asked of Jesus on more than one occasion. If so, Jesus gave a similar reply each time. There are a couple of differences in Luke’s account, if it is

the same incident. In Luke, the lawyer asked Jesus, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus asked the lawyer to answer his own question: “What is written in the law? How do you read?” (Luke 10:26). Then the lawyer replied by giving the typical Jewish answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). And the lawyer added: “and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). And Jesus said to him, “You have answered right; do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

If this is the same incident as recorded in Matthew 22, then there is another important addition. According to the Gospel of Luke, the lawyer, “desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘and who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 10:29). In reply, Jesus gave him the striking parable of the Good Samaritan. In other words, his neighbor and ours is anyone who needed his ministry. The same is true for us. Are we good neighbors who seek out and share the love of our Father with those who need it? Or are we closer akin to the lawyer who wanted Jesus to build a fence around neighbor and hence around love?

#### **4. Love enemies**

If the lawyer had heard Jesus deliver what is mistakenly called “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5—7), he would have known that Jesus included even one’s enemy in the circle of God’s love and also in the circle of the love that a child of God is supposed to express. We said above, “mistakenly called ‘The Sermon on the Mount.’” If you read it without any preconceived idea that it was a sermon, I believe you will conclude that it is a series of comments or lessons. (And after all, what is the difference between a sermon and a lesson? Many preachers are marvelous teachers, even from the pulpit.)

We cannot take the space to analyze the entire so-called sermon recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. After all, much of such an analysis would take us away from the subject of this chapter or the centrality of love in the life and teachings of Jesus who fully revealed the Father.

The passage that stresses in a particular way our emphasis on love is in Matthew 5:43-58. Jesus starts by quoting a purported statement common among the people of that time: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” We may not actually hear that statement in the contemporary world, but who would dare say that it is not commonly believed and practiced by many of us, even including some of those who claim to be children of God? And what about the nations of the world in this time of danger from the deadliest weapons of destruction the world has ever known? Is it not true that many of us who are citizens of what we consider the greatest nation in the world tend to dislike if not actually hate those of some other nations, particularly those that are strong enough to become effective competitors industrially as well as militarily?

But what was and still is the word of Jesus: “But I say to you, Love your enemies,” and He even goes so far as to say, “and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44). Then notice the motivation: “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil [who are his enemies] and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

Jesus also said that if they restricted their love to those who loved them, they did no more than the despised tax collectors. He closed this conversation with the challenge to perfection: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). There are few if any things that will more accurately and fully reveal our kinship

to our heavenly Father than the attitude we have toward those who are our enemies.

### **5. Some additional exhortations**

On closing this section on the inclusiveness of love as revealed in the New Testament, let us briefly glance at two or three examples. The first one to which attention will be called is the experience of Jesus with the rich young ruler. And incidentally, we do not find in all the Synoptic Gospels that he was “a rich young ruler.” Mark simply says “a man” (Mark 10:17), Matthew, “a young man” (Matt. 19:20), and Luke, “a ruler” (Luke 18:18).

Notice that Jesus quoted to the young ruler the second table of the Ten Commandments—those that deal with one’s relation to his fellowman. But notice also that he left out one of these: “You shall not covet. . . .” Do you suppose the rich young ruler noticed that Jesus left this one out? If Jesus had quoted it, could the young man have honestly said, “All these I have observed from my youth”? We should never forget that although the rich young man turned away from Christ, loving his riches more than he desired to follow Christ, Jesus reached out in love for him. He evidently wanted him to be a follower of His. Imagine, if you can, what the rich young ruler missed by refusing to follow and to become a participant in the work of Jesus in the world. Will you not agree that while we may be followers of His we frequently miss great blessings in that fellowship because of our failures to follow as closely and faithfully as we should and as He wants us to follow?

There are warnings in the New Testament about centering our love wrongly, or, like the rich young ruler, loving the things of life rather than the Lord of life. Jesus, on more than one occasion, spoke out against the Pharisees. On one such occasion he said, “Woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the



love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” He also said to them, “Woe to you, Pharisees, for you love the best seat in the synagogues and salutations in the marketplaces” (Luke 11:42-43). These exhortations may be more relevant for some of us in our day than we care to admit. They are needed by contemporary Christians who may tend to measure their religiosity in measurable material terms when it can only be measured accurately in terms of its vitality as expressed in relationships of life—in the home, in the church, in the community, where we work and play as well as where we live.

The preceding are only two of many references that might be cited where the wrong things or things of secondary importance may be substituted for things of greater or supreme importance.

### **John’s Contributions**

This relatively brief study of love, one of the most important words in our New Testament, would be incomplete without some attention to a few of the distinctive contributions of John. After all, there seemed to have been, to some degree, a special relationship of John and Jesus. My view is that Jesus and James and John were first cousins, their mothers being sisters.<sup>2</sup> This would not explain, however, the close relation of John and Jesus. The same did not seem to have been the case with Jesus and James, although the two of them, with Peter, were occasionally mentioned as being alone in the company of Jesus.

It has been mentioned previously that the word “love” is more frequently used in John than in all the Synoptic Gospels. In other words, the concept of love was more central, and we might add essential, in John’s record of

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<sup>2</sup> See Maston’s comments in chapter 4, “Ask,” under “1. Source of the Request.”

the life and teachings of Jesus than in the other Gospel writings.

Let me call attention to a few specific contributions that John makes, some of which provide us considerable insight into the life, teachings, and spirit of Jesus.

### **1. A new commandment**

This new commandment was given by Jesus after the Last Supper with His disciples, and after Judas had gone out from the supper to betray Jesus. It was in the midst of this wonderful yet tragic evening with the disciples that Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34). He loved them, and they were to love one another. But did He mean to go a little further? He loved them and us enough that the next day He would give His life for them and for us. When we measure our love for Him and even for those He loved and loves, how does our love measure up? We can be sure that “all men will know that” we are His disciples if we have love for one another comparable to His love for us (John 13:35).

### **2. The examination of Peter**

This is another incident found only in John’s Gospel, in John 21. It seems relatively clear that Jesus wanted to see whether Peter who had so recently denied he ever knew Him was ready to be trusted with the leadership of the new Christian movement.

The first question Jesus asked Peter after they had eaten with the other disciples was, “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15). Not many days before, Peter had said, “even though they all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29). *Now, what about it, Peter, do you love me more than these? The last few days you have not been acting much like it.* There may be some significance in the fact that Peter did

not use the same word for “love” that Jesus had used. Jesus had used what is generally considered the stronger word for love (*agapao*). Peter could not bring himself to use the word that Jesus used, and which is equated with God. The word he used is frequently used to refer to the love of a friend for a friend.

Jesus asked Peter a second time whether he loved Him, leaving off “more than these.” Again Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” again using a form of *phileo* rather than *agapao* (John 21:15b). After a somewhat similar instruction by Jesus to Peter, Jesus asked Peter a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:17). This time Jesus used Peter’s word for love—implying that He was saying: *Are you really sure, Peter, that you love me even on that level?*

The record says that “Peter was grieved because Jesus said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” (John 21:17b). Peter had denied his Lord three times. Now Jesus questioned him three times. It is also possible that Peter was disturbed because on the third occasion Jesus used the word for love that Peter had used. Notice that each time when Peter responded that he loved Jesus, the word of the latter was to do something about it. So it is with us. The only real proof that we love Jesus is what we do for others for Him. So I say, *Thank you, Jesus, for your examination of Peter, which applies in some ways to our own lives. Help us to prove our love to you by our love for others to whom you would minister if you were here in person. Help us increasingly to let you express through us your love for people, particularly for people who feel the need of your love.*

### **3. The “Little Gospel”**

Another distinctive contribution of the Gospel written by the apostle who seemingly had an especially warm relation to

Jesus is what is sometimes called “the Little Gospel.” How deeply grateful we are that John preserved it for us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Eternal life is the gift of the Father to all of us who have come into a union with the resurrected Christ and permitted Him to live in us and express Himself through us. That expression may and will be imperfect, but how grateful we should be that He judges us by our vital relationship with the risen Christ. When we drift away or fall short, as all of us do at times and to some degree, He will receive us back when we repent of our sins.

We cannot imagine any gift that expresses more love than God’s gift of His Son for you and me and all men and women, boys and girls, everywhere. Every invitation of our Father in heaven is a “whoever” invitation; it is all-inclusive.

#### **4. A great passage from 1 John (4:7-12)**

We cannot take the time and space to analyze or comment on all this relatively long passage. It is, however, a tremendously important passage on love. It starts with an appeal that is as contemporary as today, “Beloved, let us love one another” (1 John 4:7). The closing verse is equally relevant for our day, “No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12). The nearest anyone can come to seeing God is to see Him who is love living and expressing Himself in and through a child of His.

Without comment, which after all might reduce the effectiveness, let us read and let the central emphasis of the passage search our hearts:

He who does not love has not known God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only 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 expiation for our sins (1 John 4:8-10).

Then it is that John concludes: “Beloved, if God so loved us [and He did and does] we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). Our love not only for Him but for His children, our brothers and sisters, real and potential, should create in us an inner desire or urge to reach out in love to them and to express something of the Father’s love for us and for them.

You may or may not underline your Bible. If you do, why not read the remaining verses in 1 John 4 and the first three verses of chapter 5, underlining or marking in your own way? The New Testament that is a study Bible of mine has many words and phrases underlined or marked in some way in this great passage. Let me mention only a few. One word that I have underlined every place it is found in these verses is the word “abide,” to which a chapter in this study of “Little Words” was previously devoted. You will discover that it is used a half-dozen times in this one passage in 1 John. Note particularly verse 16, where “abide” is found in noun or verb form three times, as is also true of the word “live.”

It is difficult to skip over these tremendously powerful verses without comment on some. Plain-spoken John says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; . . . this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother” (1 John 4:20-21).

Do you want to join me in the following prayer?

Lord, help me to love you more,  
And help me to be a channel for your love  
As you seek to reach out through me  
to touch others with your love.  
And help me in a particular way

to reach out to loved ones, neighbors, and friends who are in greatest need for the touch of your love.

Amen and amen.

(If the one who is in need of that love is in your presence, why not reach out for a hand or if a family member, why not take him or her in your arms. Whether you breathe a prayer verbally or not, let them feel something of God's love for them as you let yourself be a channel for that love.)

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you think Maston would identify the culture around you, including of your local community, with regard to his term “a relatively affluent society”? Would it still fit? Read the Epistle of James. Have you been acquainted with its themes previously, or is this a new expression of Christian faith practice for you?
2. Does Maston's use of “brother” under *2. Love for the brotherhood* resonate with you, or do you sense a dissonance with your understanding of love for others from his cultural conditioning? How would you suggest it be revised?
3. Does Maston's allusion to a sermon and a lesson as perhaps separate ideas detract from the principles implicit and explicit in Matthew 5—7?
4. Maston references the matter of nuclear weapons positioned to destroy our enemies. What other global issues bear the need for “love of enemies” to address the common good?
5. Where does the concept of love for your neighbor clash with your prejudices?
6. How do we or can we love, specifically? Do the instructions from the Apostle Paul in Romans 12 provide

starting points toward implementing genuine love? How do these juxtapose with John's thoughts?