



# THE BEREA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Let’s Keep Talking About Love

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Have you noticed our world’s interest in *love*? “We love baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and . . .” We love our parents, children, spouses, friends. But we also love a good thriller, romance, or biography. We love sports (pick your favorite), music (choose your genre), a good movie, or play. We love our country, a good parade, a quiet snowfall, leaves turning, birds singing, the mountains (or beach), a gorgeous sunrise/sunset, or napping while it rains on a tin roof. Of course, our culture’s primary uses of *love* regard relationships. The word is commonly used with one of three meanings: emotional, romantic, or sexual; sometimes the uses overlap.

Given the many meanings we try to express with one word, we understand if some might be confused about the Bible’s teaching about love. The statement made to me by a good sister in my first work with a local church illustrates: “I know what Jesus said, but I just *can’t* love my enemy!” She referred to Matthew 5.44, but the unspoken question behind her declaration could have been, “Which of our world’s meanings of love did Jesus intend?”

The short answer is, “None of the above.” But the question arises because our culture tries to do with one word what the Greeks did with multiple terms (sources vary, listing from 6 to 9 words; cf. e.g., “8 Greek Words” 2024). And unless we teach differently, and repeat the point often, we will be prone to use the word as our culture does and misunderstand the meaning the NT emphasizes.

In Matthew 5, Jesus used ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*), the verb form of ἀγάπη (*agapē*); the forms appear in the NT 143 and 116 times respectively. Christians didn’t invent the word, but gave it a prominence it didn’t have in the Greek world. *Agapaō* first appears in Homer, but “*agapē* is unknown before its usage in the LXX” (Spicq 1994, 14), where the noun appears 19 times, and the verb appears 271 times (Taylor and Wheeler 2012). “Contrary to what is often written, no certain attestation is available in any papyrus from the pre-Christian era” (Spicq 1994, 15).

In the NT, *agapē* “is the most *rational* kind of love, inasmuch as it involves recognition and judgment of value” (my emphasis). *Agapaō* “also often means ‘value, set great store by, hold in high esteem’” (Spicq 1994, 11–12). Depending on the context, which is always the final determinant of a word’s meaning, it is not always distinguishable from φιλέω/φίλος (*phileō/philos*). But—and note this—“people are never commanded to love one another with φιλέω or φιλία [Jas 4.4], but only with ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη” (Louw and Nida, 1989, 293).

This doesn’t mean *agapē* never includes friendship or affection; it certainly can. But, “while friendship is properly and only used of a relationship between equals, *agapē* links persons of dif-

ferent conditions ...; it is disinterested and generous love, full of thoughtfulness and concern” (Spicq 1994, 13). In other words, to demonstrate *agapē* toward someone, I don’t have to like them (enemies), or even know who they are (disinterested); but I must do what is in their best interest—even if it costs me to do so.

Consider some NT passages that show what *agapē* means in action. Matthew 5.43’s reference to loving neighbors and hating enemies—an expression of the Mosaic Law (Lev 19.18) and understanding of Jesus’ hearers—fits with modern uses of love: we love the people we feel good about, but not the people we don’t like. But verse 44’s “love your enemies” is at odds with modern use: by definition, enemies are not people we feel good about; yet Jesus tells us to love them. The parallel in Luke 6.27 shows what he means: “Love your enemies, *do what is good* to those who hate you.”

Thus, we are closer to what Jesus intends if we translate *agapē/agapaō* with “esteem” or “value,” bearing in mind that “in the NT it would almost always be necessary to translate *agapē* as ‘demonstration of love’” (Spicq 1994, 12).

Second, look at Romans 5.8, 10 alongside 1 John 4.9–10. Despite the fact that we were God’s enemies, he esteemed us so much that he sent his Son to be “the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Finally, consider Luke 10.25–37. In his Good Samaritan story, told in response to the lawyer’s attempt to find a loophole in the second great commandment, Jesus transforms the question from “Who is my neighbor?” to “To whom should I *be* a neighbor?” That is, “Whom should I esteem?” As the lawyer correctly saw, only the Samaritan had valued, therefore loved, the beaten man.

Jesus’ reply to the lawyer is his expectation for us: “Go and do the same.”

### Works Cited

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From the Sermons & Class Notes, Textual Studies page ([here](#)), “Transformed Esteem” (Rom 12.3) ([here](#)) — Against the backdrop of our culture’s self-esteem emphasis, we consider the better basis for that esteem as presented by Paul.

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