

Text: Jn 21.15-19

I miscalculated in my schedule, so I thought I wouldn't have an "Ask the Pastor" opportunity until after our special speaker. So, today is a bonus section.

I still plan to do the question on fasting starting in two weeks, it will probably take at least two messages.

This week, I turn to a question about two Greek words for "love."

Agape and Philos: What's the Difference?

The question is one of those controversial ones, at least among the commentaries. Our text is the most prominent example where the words are used together in the Greek New Testament, and, if there was a clear distinction, this would be the place to play it up.

Read Jn 21.15-19

Let's outline the three questions and responses:

Jesus: Simon, do you *agape* me?

Peter: Yes Lord, you know that I *philos* you.

Jesus: Simon, do you *agape* me?

Peter: Yes Lord, you know that I *philos* you.

Jesus: Simon, do you *philos* me?

Peter: Lord, you know all things, you know that I *philos* you.

Now much is made by some commentaries about the word changes. I have to say that I have made much of them myself — following my commentaries.

The idea is that *agape* is a higher form of love, an act of the will, whereas *philos* is more connected to the emotions, an act of the heart.

It makes for a powerful sermon, but... is that what John intended? Is there really a wide distinction between the terms?

Proposition: Love for God should mean labor for God's sheep.

I. The view that the words describe distinctly different forms of love

I don't have time to track down the history of this view, but it is widely held. I will give some examples.

A. From a Christianity Today article by psychologist Paul H. Wright

“*Eros* refers to self-centered love, love based solely on some need or desire of the one who loves. Love is extended only because the loved one is seen as capable of satisfying that need or desire. We would expect a friendship based on *eros* to last only as long as the loving person has the need or as long as the loved one is capable of satisfying it.

“*Philia* refers to love based on mutual respect and devotion. It is extended to the loved one because of the particular person he happens to be. This love may be truly unselfish and self-giving, and requires only that the love that is expressed be in some way acknowledged and reciprocated.

“*Agape* refers to unconditional love, a love that is extended to the loved one regardless of who he is or what he is like. It is love that emanates from the very nature of the loving person. It is, in a word, divine love.”¹

B. Commentary by B. F. Westcott on Jn 21.17:

“When the Lord puts the question ‘the third time,’ He adopts the word which St. Peter had used. Just as the idea of comparison was given up before, so no the idea of the loftiest love is given up.”²

- Note the term “loftiest”

C. An opposite error, by Trench

1. Trench is well known for his book *Synonyms of the New Testament*
2. Trench picks up on the Latin, *dilige* and *amo*, and contrasts with some writing by Cicero
 - a. *Dilige* = mere esteem (corresponding to *agape* in the Jn 21)
 - b. *Amo* = “passionate warmth of affection”³

¹ Paul H. Wright, “Friendship for God’s Sake,” *Christianity Today*, March 3, 1972, 501–2.

² B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: Murray, 1908), 303.

³ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), 41.

There are many examples of these types of contrasts, and good Bible students taking a variety of positions.

D. A comment on Ed Wheat's distinctions in *Love Life*

1. I hand out *Love Life* to those who are getting married
2. Ed Wheat picks out five Greek words for love to describe various aspects of married relationships
3. Wheat teaches that the words always carry the distinctions he assigns to them
4. The problem is that you can find examples where the words he chooses seem to trespass in the territory belonging to other words
5. Nevertheless, thinking about married love in those five categories is still valuable
 - a. You need to have a kind of self-less love that sticks with your spouse *no matter what happens*: agape love (the usual def.)
 - b. You need to have friendship for your spouse
 - c. You need to have a familiar, comfortable belonging with your spouse
 - d. ... and so on

II. Key observations which cast doubt on a hard and fast distinction

A. The word agape has a wide range of uses in the Bible

1. The Pharisees loved the approval of men more than the approval of God

Jn 12.43 for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

2. Jesus said it was possible to love money (agape love)

Mt 6.24 ¶ "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

3. The Greek OT uses agape to translate the delight Israel had in wandering away from God

Jer 14.10 Thus says the LORD to this people, "Even so they have loved to wander; they have not kept their feet in check. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; now He will remember their iniquity and call their sins to account."

4. The Greek OT uses agape to translate a description of immoral love

Ezek 16.37 therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, even all those whom You loved *and* all those whom you hated. So I will gather them against you from every direction and expose your nakedness to them that they may see all your nakedness.

- B. The original conversation would have occurred in Aramaic, not Greek

1. The normal language of Palestine at the time was Aramaic
2. Aramaic has *no* such distinctions in its vocabulary
3. John recorded the conversation in Greek, supplying the vocabulary according to his own choices

- C. John has a "habit of introducing slight variations in all sorts of places without real difference of meaning"⁴

The first two objections seem conclusive to me. While we have an emotional attachment to the "romance" of the distinction (we *philos* it), we need to choose to accept the facts of usage (and *agape* the real point!).

III. What is the emphasis of the passage?

- A. Jesus keeps repeating an instruction in the passage

1. Tend my lambs (15)
2. Shepherd my sheep (16)
3. Tend my sheep (17)

- There is some variation in the Greek of these terms also

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1971), 873.

The point: The Lord is restoring Peter to Ministry, his mistakes, his denial, notwithstanding.

B. Peter was grieved by the third question

1. Not because of the form of the question
2. But because of the repetition of the question (and perhaps the circumstances — the charcoal fire, the repetition, the reminder...)

“He did not understand why Jesus kept hammering him on this issue. The reason is not just that Peter had failed three times but even more the meaning of threefold repetition. To repeat something a second time makes it emphatic (example, ‘Truly, truly,’ the double *amēn* in John, see comments on 1:51), but to stress it a third time gives it ultimate significance, as in the *Trisagion*, ‘Holy, holy, holy’ in Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8, which makes holiness the defining characteristic of God and of our worship. As such love becomes a virtual covenant obligation for Simon Peter and for all followers of Christ.”⁵

“Jesus would not let him go with offering an easy response. Instead, Jesus probed him until he opened the wounded heart of this would-be follower. Off-the-cuff replies and well-meaning superficial responses to the risen Lord will not work in the call of Jesus to the life of discipleship. Jesus forced Peter to learn the hard lesson of a changed life. Everyone who follows Jesus must learn what real believing and loving Jesus means.”⁶

Conclusion:

Proposition: Love for God should mean labor for God’s sheep.

All of us are called to minister to others. If you want to love God, find ways to serve God by feeding his sheep.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *John: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 484.

⁶ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 334.