



Love - Feeling, Decision or Gift?

There is an ongoing debate...is love a feeling or a decision? Both sides make a good case.

I would not have married my wife if I had no feelings for her. And consider, if I sent her a valentine's card that said "I have made the decision to keep loving you", she would probably leave me. Love is a feeling.

But Jesus said "*love your enemies*" (Matthew 5:44). Do I have to have feelings for them? Take them out for a nice dinner? Send them a valentine's card? What about the pizza I ate last night? I did love it, although I did not go into ecstasy like most of the people who eat food in TV ads. Love is a decision.

I am going to take a leap of faith, go out on a limb and use other cliches. I don't think love is either. I believe love is a gift from God. "*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God*" (1 John 4:7). Don't get me wrong, I am not downplaying feelings. But I don't think everlasting love is possible from feelings or decisions alone. These are both too fragile. Otherwise, why do 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce, even among active Christians?

The English language is strange. We use no less than four different words to describe exactly how we want our coffee; cappuccino, latte, espresso and macchiato. But we only get one word for love. The ancient Greeks used somewhere between six and nine words for love, depending on who is counting. Let's look at four of those words, as gifts of love from God.

Agape – Unconditional love

Agape is sacrificial, merciful, selfless and forgiving. Agape is not given based on merit and does not end when feelings change. Agape is a promise, a covenant, that says "I do!". It sounds like a decision. But nobody can simply make a decision to love that way and then keep the promise, not without the grace of God.

The word *agape* appears in the New Testament many times. Check out the original Greek text. "*No one has greater agape than this, to lay down one's life*" (John 15:13), "*agape your enemies*" (Matthew 5:44), "*husbands, agape your wives*" (Colossians 3:19), "*these three remain: faith, hope and agape*" (Corinthians 13:14).

It is by the grace of God that agape forgives and prays for enemies...keeps marriage vows...never abuses...is patient...is kind...is never jealous, and so on. We cannot do this on our own. Feelings of love or romance are exciting and make much better valentine's cards; but don't we all desire agape as well?

Phileo – Brotherly love

Phileo is warm affection, intimate friendship and deep caring. *Phileo* is characterized by admiration and esteem. *Phileo* has aspects of feelings and decisions, as we choose friends and develop feelings for them. But there is a deeper friendship that is a gift from God.

There are twenty-five occurrences of *phileo* in the New Testament. One verse, quite interesting for meditation, is "*The one who phileo(s) father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me.*" (Matthew 10:37). Interesting that the word agape was not used. We should have a deeper friendship and caring for Jesus, but still agape parents.

But the most prominent example of *phileo* in the New Testament occurs in John 21:15-17, where Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves Him. The original Greek text brings an entirely new meaning to this conversation. Twice, Jesus asks “*Peter, do you agape me?*”. Knowing the meaning of *agape*, we now know what Jesus is really asking. Both times however, Peter responds “*Yes Lord, you know I phileo you.*” Peter does not have the gift of *agape*. Peter also knows Jesus is aware of this. Peter tells Jesus they are dear friends. The third time, Jesus asks Peter “*Do you phileo me?*”. Peter became disturbed; not because Jesus asked a third time, but because the third time Jesus gave up *agape* and questioned Peter’s friendship. Peter later received the gift of *agape*, as he was crucified upside-down for Jesus. Until he received that gift, *phileo* was the best he could do.

Friends can come and go; but true friends are gifts from God. *Phileo* goes beyond normal friendship. *Phileo* is caring for each other as much as each one cares for themselves. We all need *phileo*.

Storge – Family love

Storge is affectionate and devotional love that occurs naturally in a family. *Storge* is not based on merit, but there are feelings for one another. The affection between parents, children, siblings is a natural gift from God. We don’t have to ask God for it. God gives us this gift at conception. When God’s gift is rejected and replaced by sin, families can be torn apart.

The word *storge* occurs only once in the New Testament. Paul says “*Let agape be sincere, abhor evil, storge one another with mutual affection.*” (Romans 12:10) Paul instructs Christians to be a family, and go beyond *phileo* of each other. We, as the Body of Christ should have the same devotion, affection and mutual protection for one another that occurs naturally in the family.

When one considers the discomfort and pain a child in the womb inflicts upon the mother, and the years of sacrifice required of parents to raise a child, there is no other way to explain the parents’ love for the child than God’s gift of *storge*. If any other person would cause such pain, we might consider them an enemy. Pray for and protect the gift of *storge* in your family. May the Holy Family be the model of our own family.

Philautia – Self love

Philautia is a positive attitude about oneself, self-esteem and self-respect. The word never appears in the New Testament and might be slightly questionable here; but I still believe it to be a gift from God. Think of *philautia* as *agape* of oneself.

We are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. We are not worthy. We make mistakes. Others judge us based on physical appearance, intelligence, abilities and social standing. With all that going against us, it can be very difficult to be kind, forgiving and accepting of oneself. Doubts can enter... “How can God love me? How can others love me?” We put ourselves down and beat ourselves up. Without *philautia*, we may be tempted to change who we are to please others or win their affection.

Jesus accepts us as we are, yet desires we draw ever closer to Him in holiness. With *philautia*, we accept ourselves with our failures, while we strive for holiness one day at a time.

Conclusion



Seek God's Gifts of Love

God gives us gifts of love that can take us beyond human ability to love. We can fulfill His command to love only with His help. For a marriage that lasts a lifetime, seek God's gifts of love. Pray with each other to grow in love. And, of course, don't forget the chocolate.