Love—A Closer Look

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Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless noted.

Introduction

In common usage, love describes how I feel. In Scripture, love describes what God does, and what He calls us to do.

In *Faith—A Closer Look* and *Hope—A Closer Look*, we saw how far the everyday meaning of a word can drift from its meaning in Scripture. "I believe" has weakened into "I suppose." "I hope" has come to mean "I wish, but I'm not sure." In both cases the biblical word carries a weight and a certainty the English word has largely lost.

No word shows this gap more clearly than *love*. It may be the most used, and most misused, word in our language. We love our spouses, our children, our dogs, our favorite team, a good taco and a new song, all in the same breath. Popular culture tells us love is a feeling we fall into and out of, that love means approval, and that love is whatever makes us happy.

Scripture speaks of love constantly, yet it means something far deeper and far more demanding. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37–39) and the greatest of the three that abide (1 Corinthians 13:13). If we read those verses with our culture's definition in mind, we will misunderstand God, ourselves and what He asks of us.

This study takes a closer look at love in the Old Testament and in the New. We will ask whether the two testaments describe the same love, look at the Hebrew and Greek words behind our English word, and consider the much-discussed difference between *agape* and *phileo*.

The English Problem: One Word Doing Too Much

English asks one small word to cover an enormous range. Consider how we use it:

- "I love pizza." (I enjoy it.)
- "I love that song." (It gives me pleasure.)
- "I love my friends." (I feel warmly toward them.)
- "I'm in love." (I feel romantic attraction.)
- "I love you, Mom." (I feel deep family affection.)
- "I love God." (?)

In almost every case, the common thread is *feeling*. Love is something that happens *to* me. It is measured by how strongly I feel it, and it is the object's job to keep producing that feeling. When the feeling fades, we say love has died.

Three assumptions come with that usage, and all three run against Scripture:

1. **Love is a feeling.** Scripture *commands* love, and no one can be commanded to have a feeling.

2. **Love is drawn out by the worth of the one loved.** We love what is lovable. Scripture says God loved us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).
3. **Love means approval.** To love someone is to affirm whatever they choose. Scripture says love "does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6), and that the Lord "disciplines the one he loves" (Hebrews 12:6).

To be fair, Hebrew and Greek also use their love words broadly. Isaac loved a particular dish of game (Genesis 27:4). The Pharisees loved the best seats (Luke 11:43). The problem is not that the biblical words are narrow. It is that Scripture *defines* love by pointing to God, while our culture defines it by pointing to our feelings.

Love in the Old Testament

The Old Testament does not give us a definition of love. It gives us a God who loves, and it shows us what His love does. Three Hebrew words carry most of the weight.

'Ahav: the everyday word

'Ahav (verb) and *'ahavah* (noun) are the general words for love, as broad as our English word. The first time "love" appears in the Bible is Genesis 22:2: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, *whom you love* [*'ahav*]." From there the word covers:

- **Family love:** Abraham for Isaac (Genesis 22:2); Rebekah for Jacob (Genesis 25:28).
- **Romantic love:** Jacob for Rachel, so that seven years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love [*'ahavah*] he had for her" (Genesis 29:20).
- **Friendship:** "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved [*'ahav*] him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1).
- **Things and pleasures:** savory food (Genesis 27:4), sleep (Proverbs 20:13), bribes (Isaiah 1:23).
- **Sinful desire:** Amnon "loved" [*'ahav*] his half-sister Tamar, then hated her "with very great hatred" once he had used her (2 Samuel 13:1, 15).

The same word also describes **God's love for His people** and **the love He commands in return**. So in Hebrew, as in English, the word alone does not tell us what kind of love is meant. The context and the one who loves tell us.

God's love is His choice, not our merit

The clearest Old Testament statement of God's love explains it by… His love:

> It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love [*chashaq*, to set one's affection on] on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves [*'ahavah*] you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers. (Deuteronomy 7:7–8)

Why did God love Israel? Not because Israel was impressive. He loved them because He loved them. His love begins in Him, not in the worth of its object. That alone sets biblical love apart from "I love what attracts me."

Moses gives a second reason in the same breath: the LORD "is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers." God's love for Israel was not a fresh impulse in Moses' day. It was the outworking of promises sworn centuries earlier to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When God confirmed His promise to Abraham, He said, "By myself I have sworn" (Genesis 22:16). There was no one greater to swear by.

So biblical love is not only a choice God makes; it is a commitment He binds Himself to keep. The very next verse draws the conclusion: "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love [*chesed*] with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7:9). Here love and faithfulness are joined, the very combination we will meet in the word *chesed*. Centuries later, Zechariah praised God for remembering "the oath that he swore to our father Abraham" in sending the Messiah (Luke 1:72–73). God's love keeps its word, across generations.

Hosea makes the point painfully vivid. God tells the prophet, "Go again, love [*'ahav*] a woman who is loved [*'ahav*] by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves [*'ahavah*] the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods" (Hosea 3:1). This is love that keeps loving the unfaithful.

The same truth explains one of the Bible's most startling statements: "I have loved [*'ahav*] Jacob but Esau I have hated" (Malachi 1:2–3; quoted in Romans 9:13). This is not the language of emotion. It is the language of choice. God chose Jacob's line to carry His covenant promises, and not Esau's. Paul makes the point that the choice was made before the twins were born, "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad" (Romans 9:11).

Hebrew often uses "love" and "hate" this way, to mean "choose" and "not choose," or "prefer" and "prefer less." Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah," and the next verse says that "Leah was hated" (Genesis 29:30–31). Jesus' call to "hate" father and mother (Luke 14:26) is put another way in Matthew: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). God did not despise Esau; He gave Esau's descendants their own land (Deuteronomy 2:5). The point is that God's love, at its root, is His sovereign choice.

***Chesed*: steadfast, covenant love**

If one Old Testament word captures God's love, it is *chesed*, used about 250 times. Translators have struggled to find an English equivalent:

Version	**Usual rendering of *chesed***
ESV	steadfast love
KJV	mercy, lovingkindness
NASB (1995)	lovingkindness
NIV	love, unfailing love

Chesed is love joined to loyalty. It is the love that keeps its promises and does not quit. It is tied to God's covenant, which is why it so often appears beside "faithfulness." When God proclaimed His own name to Moses, He described Himself this way:

> The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*chesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [*chesed*] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exodus 34:6–7)

That self-description echoes through the rest of the Old Testament. Psalm 136 repeats "for his steadfast love [*chesed*] endures forever" twenty-six times. Lamentations, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah and written amid Jerusalem's ruin, still says, "The steadfast love [*chesed*] of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22–23). And through Jeremiah God tells His wayward people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love [*'ahavah*]; therefore I have continued my faithfulness [*chesed*] to you" (Jeremiah 31:3).

Notice that *chesed* is never just a feeling. It is something God *keeps*, *shows* and *does*.

Racham: tender compassion

Racham (compassion, mercy) is related to *rechem*, the word for womb. It is the tender, protective love of a parent for a helpless child. "As a father shows compassion [*racham*] to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). Even a nursing mother may forget her child, God says, "yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

So the Old Testament does not present a cold, duty-bound love. God's love is deeply felt. But it is not *defined* by feeling. It is anchored in His choice, His covenant and His character.

The love God asks of His people

The Old Testament commands love in two directions:

- **Toward God:** "You shall love [*'ahav*] the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- **Toward others:** "You shall love [*'ahav*] your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). The same chapter extends this to the foreigner: "You shall love [*'ahav*] him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34).

Love for God, in Deuteronomy, is not a private emotion. It is spelled out as "loving [*'ahav*] the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him" (Deuteronomy 30:20). Love for neighbor is spelled out in practical commands: no grudges, no revenge, fair wages, care for the poor, the widow and the stranger. Even an enemy's stray ox was to be returned (Exodus 23:4–5), and "if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat" (Proverbs 25:21).

God also asks His people for *chesed*. "I desire steadfast love [*chesed*] and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). In Hosea, *chesed* is the covenant loyalty God looked for in Israel and did not find: "Your love [*chesed*] is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away" (Hosea 6:4). Micah turns it toward others: What does the LORD require but "to do justice, and to love kindness [*chesed*], and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

Context is key. "Love" in the Old Testament is not one thing. The same verb, *'ahav*, describes Abraham's love for Isaac, Isaac's taste for game, and Amnon's lust for Tamar. God's love is described with *'ahav*, with *chesed* and with *racham*, and each brings out a different side of it. So when we meet "love" in an Old Testament passage, the word alone will not tell us what is meant. We have to ask who is loving, what or whom they love, and what the surrounding text shows that love doing. The same principle will hold when we turn to the Greek of the New Testament.

Love in the New Testament: The Greek Words

Greek had several words for love, and many of us have heard that each names a different kind of love. The New Testament actually uses only two of them, and one far more than the other.

Greek word	Common description	In the New Testament
agapao (verb), *agape* (noun)	love that values, chooses and gives	About 260 times; the main word for love
phileo (verb), *philos* (friend)	affection, fondness, friendship	About 25 times as a verb; many compounds
storge	natural family affection	Only in compounds, e.g. *astorgos*, "heartless" (Romans 1:31; 2 Timothy 3:3)
eros	passionate or sexual desire	Never used

A few observations:

- **Eros is absent.** Romantic love is honored in Scripture (read the Song of Solomon), but the New Testament writers never chose *eros* to describe love.
- **Phileo appears in many compounds.** *Philadelphia* is "brotherly love" (Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:1). *Philoxenia*, literally "love of strangers," is hospitality (Romans 12:13). Older women are to train younger women to be *philandros* and *philoteknos*, "to love their husbands and children" (Titus 2:4). There are negative compounds too: *philargyria*, love of money (1 Timothy 6:10), and *philedonos*, "lovers of pleasure" (2 Timothy 3:4).
- **Agape was not a special "Christian" invention.** The noun *agape* was uncommon in earlier Greek literature, but it appears often in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the apostles knew. There the translators used *agape* to render *'ahavah*, including the romantic love of the Song of Solomon ("love is strong as death," Song 8:6) and even Amnon's lust for Tamar (2 Samuel 13:15).

That last point matters. The New Testament writers did not take a word that already meant "divine, self-giving love." They took a fairly ordinary word and filled it with new content by pointing to God, and above all to the cross. The meaning comes less from the dictionary than from the One who demonstrates it.

Agape and Phileo: Is There a Difference?

Many of us were taught a tidy scheme: *agape* is God's perfect, unconditional love, and *phileo* is a lesser, merely human friendship love. C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* (1960) helped make the idea popular, and it is repeated in countless sermons. Is it right?

The honest answer is: partly. There is a real difference in *emphasis*, but the two words overlap far more than the tidy scheme allows.

The difference in emphasis

- *Phileo* leans toward **affection and fondness**, the warmth of friendship. Its related noun is *philos*, "friend." Jesus is called "a friend [*philos*] of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). It can also mean "to kiss" (Mark 14:44).
- *Agapao* leans toward **valuing, preferring and choosing**. It is the word Scripture uses when love is *commanded* ("love your enemies," Matthew 5:44) and when love is *defined* (1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4).

That tendency is real, and it helps explain why the New Testament writers reached for *agapao* when describing the love God shows and requires. You can command someone to treat an enemy with good will. It is harder to command them to feel fond of that enemy.

The overlap

Now look at how freely the two words are interchanged, especially by John:

Statement	***agapao***	***phileo***
The Father loves the Son	John 3:35	John 5:20
Jesus loved Lazarus	John 11:5	John 11:3, 36
"The disciple whom Jesus loved"	John 13:23	John 20:2
God loves believers	John 14:21	John 16:27
The Lord disciplines those He loves	Hebrews 12:6	Revelation 3:19
Pharisees love the best seats	Luke 11:43	Matthew 23:6

And *agapao* is not always noble:

- People "loved [*agapao*] the darkness rather than the light" (John 3:19).
- Many authorities "loved [*agapao*] the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:43).
- "Demas, in love [*agapao*] with this present world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10).

Meanwhile *phileo* can describe the highest love: "the Father himself loves [*phileo*] you, because you have loved [*phileo*] me" (John 16:27). Paul even writes, "If anyone has no love [*phileo*] for the Lord, let him be accursed" (1 Corinthians 16:22).

So *agape* does not automatically mean divine love, and *phileo* does not automatically mean lesser love. As with *'ahav*, the context and the one loving decide the meaning.

John 21: "Do you love me?"

The passage where this question matters most is Jesus' restoration of Peter after the resurrection:

	Jesus asks	**Peter answers**
1st (v. 15)	"Do you love [*agapao*] me more than these?"	"You know that I love [*phileo*] you."
2nd (v. 16)	"Do you love [*agapao*] me?"	"You know that I love [*phileo*] you."

	Jesus asks	Peter answers
3rd (v. 17)	"Do you love [*phileo*] me?"	"You know everything; you know that I love [*phileo*] you."

Two readings have been held by careful students of Scripture.

Reading 1: the change is meaningful. Peter, humbled by his denials, will no longer claim the higher love. He answers with the more modest word. On the third question Jesus comes down to Peter's word, as if to ask, "Are you even my friend?" That is why Peter was grieved.

Reading 2: the change is style. John varies his vocabulary throughout this passage: "feed" and "tend," "lambs" and "sheep," and two different verbs for "know." No one builds a doctrine on the difference between lambs and sheep. And John himself uses the two love words interchangeably elsewhere, as the table above shows. On this reading, Peter was grieved for the reason John actually gives: "because he said to him the third time" (v. 17), three questions for three denials.

Either way, the main point of the passage is not in dispute. Jesus does not dismiss Peter. He restores him, and He defines love for Himself in terms of action: "Feed my sheep." Love for Christ is shown by caring for those Christ loves.

What we can say with confidence

- *Agapao* and *phileo* have different shades: choosing and valuing on one side, warmth and affection on the other.
- The shades overlap heavily, and neither word carries a fixed meaning of "divine" or "human."
- We should be cautious about preaching sharp distinctions the text itself does not make.
- What makes biblical love distinctive is not a Greek word. It is the way God defines love by His own actions.

Love Is Defined by God

In *Faith—A Closer Look* we saw that faith is only as good as its object. Love works the other way around. Its meaning is set by its *source*. We do not learn what love is by studying our feelings and then projecting them onto God. We learn what love is by watching God.

A note on the Greek: in every verse quoted in this section, "love" translates agape *(noun) or* agapao *(verb).*

"God is love"

> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8)

This verse is often turned around to mean "love is God," so that whatever we feel as love must be divine. John says the reverse. God is the definition, and love is what His nature looks like in action. John immediately tells us what that action was:

> 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 have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9–10)

"In this is love." If we want a definition, there it is: not our love for God, but His sending His Son to bear the penalty for our sins.

Love that gives

The New Testament repeatedly points to the cross as the measure of love:

- "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).
- "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).
- "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).
- "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16).
- "The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Notice the pattern. In each verse, love is followed by a verb of action: *gave*, *died*, *lay down*, *gave himself*. Biblical love is known by what it does.

Love toward the unlovable

Romans 5 makes the contrast with human love explicit. "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7–8). Human love, at its best, might die for someone good. God, in His love, gave His Son to die for the ungodly, for those who were His enemies (Romans 5:6, 10).

This is Deuteronomy 7 again, now in full color. God's love is not drawn out by our worth. It flows from His nature and is poured out on people who have nothing to recommend them.

Love that looks ahead

God's love did not stop at what we were. It looked ahead to what we could become. Those He loved were "alienated and hostile in mind," yet He reconciled them "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (Colossians 1:21–22). They were once "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). Now they are "no longer strangers and aliens," but "members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19).

That was the goal from the start. "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:4–5). Jesus looked ahead too: "for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). The cross was not only a rescue from something. It was a rescue *for* something: sons and daughters at home in their Father's house. John can hardly contain himself: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

Love Is Commanded, So Love Is More Than a Feeling

Here is the simplest test of our culture's definition: God commands love. "You shall love the Lord your God… You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). "Love one another" (John 13:34). "Husbands, love your wives" (Ephesians 5:25).

No one can obey a command to feel something. If love were only an emotion, these commands would be impossible. So biblical love must be something we can *choose* and *do*.

Love obeys

Jesus ties love for Him directly to obedience:

- "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).
- "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).
- "And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments" (2 John 6).

This is the same pattern we saw in Deuteronomy, where loving God meant "obeying his voice and holding fast to him."

Love acts

"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). John's example is concrete: if we see a brother in need and close our hearts against him, "how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

Paul's great description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is almost entirely verbs and behaviors:

> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

There is not one word here about how love feels. Every phrase describes how love treats people. A useful exercise is to put your own name in place of "love" and read it again. It is humbling, and it is clarifying.

Love fulfills the law

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10). Jesus said all the Law and the Prophets "depend" on the two great love commands (Matthew 22:40). Love does not replace God's commands; it is what they were always aiming at.

Walking in love by the spirit

Paul tells us to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2). But how do we know what love looks like in a particular situation? No written command, however good, can cover every circumstance. What is loving in one case may not be loving in another.

Scripture itself shows this:

- "Answer not a fool according to his folly" is followed immediately by "Answer a fool according to his folly" (Proverbs 26:4–5). Both are wise. Which one applies depends on the situation.
- Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), yet refused to have Titus circumcised (Galatians 2:3–5). Neither choice was right or wrong in itself; each was what best served the gospel in that circumstance.

- "Now Jesus loved [*agapao*] Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer" (John 11:5–6). Love, in that moment, meant waiting, so that God would be glorified in raising Lazarus.

This is where the gift of holy spirit comes in. The love of God has been "poured into our hearts" through that gift (Romans 5:5), and the gift also equips us to know what love calls for. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit [spirit] for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Through the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge and the ability to distinguish between spirits (1 Corinthians 12:8, 10), God can help a believer know what love requires here and now: when to speak and when to stay silent, when to give and when to withhold, when to comfort and when to correct.

It is no accident that Paul's great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, sits between two chapters on the manifestations of the spirit. He ties them together: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts [*pneumatika*, literally "spiritual matters"; the word "gifts" is supplied by the translators]" (1 Corinthians 14:1). He uses the same word to open the whole discussion: "Now concerning spiritual gifts [*pneumatikon*, again literally "spiritual matters"], brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed" (1 Corinthians 12:1). Chapters 12 through 14 form one unit, and love stands at its center. The written Word tells us what love is and sets its boundaries. The spirit-gift, operated in love, can help us know how to walk in it in the particular moment. Paul prays for exactly this: "that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent" (Philippians 1:9–10).

What about feelings?

None of this means biblical love is cold. God's *racham* is tender. Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb, and the onlookers said, "See how he loved [*phileo*] him!" (John 11:36). Paul longed for the Philippians "with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:8). Feelings are a welcome part of love.

The point is the order. Feelings follow love; they do not define it. When feelings are present, love enjoys them. When they are absent, love still acts. And very often, the feelings grow as we choose to love.

Old Testament and New: Same, Similar, or Different?

The love is the same, because the God is the same. What changes is how fully that love is revealed, how far it reaches, and how it is lived out.

The same love

When Jesus was asked for the greatest commandment, He did not announce something new. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 (Matthew 22:37–40). The two great love commands of the New Testament are Old Testament commands.

The character of God's love is the same as well. The God who "set his love" on Israel because He chose to (Deuteronomy 7:7–8) is the God who loved us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). The God "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6) is revealed in the Son, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Many scholars hear in John's phrase a deliberate echo of Exodus 34.

The popular idea of an Old Testament "God of wrath" and a New Testament "God of love" does not survive a careful reading of either testament. The Old Testament is full of God's love, and the New Testament speaks plainly of His judgment.

A fuller love

Yet the New Testament does bring something new. John records Jesus saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Later John reflects on this: it is "no new commandment, but an old commandment… At the same time, it is a new commandment" (1 John 2:7–8). How can it be both?

The command to love was old. What was new came in four ways:

1. **A new measure.** The Law said, "as yourself." Jesus says, "as I have loved you." The standard is no longer my love for myself but Christ's self-sacrificing love for me.
2. **A new display.** The Old Testament described God's love in words and acts of rescue. The cross displays it in its fullest form. "In this is love… that he loved us and sent his Son" (1 John 4:10).
3. **A wider reach.** The Law already commanded love for the foreigner and kindness to an enemy. But by Jesus' day, many had narrowed "neighbor" to their own people. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43–44). The second half of that saying is not found in the Law. Jesus corrects the narrowing, and the parable of the Good Samaritan answers "Who is my neighbor?" with a despised Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37).
4. **A new power.** The Old Testament itself looked forward to this: "The LORD your God will circumcise your heart… so that you will love [*'ahav*] the LORD your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:6). In the New Testament that promise is fulfilled, at least in part:[1] "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit [holy spirit] who [which] has been given to us" (Romans 5:5), and "the fruit of the Spirit [spirit] is love" (Galatians 5:22). (See also *Spirit of Life—A Closer Look*.)

At a glance

	Old Testament	**New Testament**
Main words	*'ahav*, *chesed*, *racham*	*agapao*, *phileo*
Source of love	God's free choice (Deut. 7:7–8)	God's nature: "God is love" (1 John 4:8)
Supreme display	Rescue from Egypt; covenant faithfulness	The cross (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10)
Command toward God	"with all your heart… soul… might" (Deut. 6:5)	The same, quoted by Jesus (Matt. 22:37)
Command toward others	"as yourself" (Lev. 19:18)	"as I have loved you" (John 13:34)

[1] **"At least in part."** The gift of holy spirit is real and present now, but it is a first installment, not the whole. Paul calls it "the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Ephesians 1:14; see also 2 Corinthians 5:5). Even those who have "the firstfruits of the Spirit [spirit]" still "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). The full realization comes with the change described in 1 Corinthians 15: "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet… For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51–53). Then the love poured into our hearts now will be known and lived without limit.

	Old Testament	New Testament
Who is my neighbor?	Fellow Israelite and resident foreigner	Anyone in need, including enemies
Power to love	Promised: a circumcised heart (Deut. 30:6)	Given, in part: the gift of holy spirit (Rom. 5:5)

So the answer to "same, similar, or different?" is this: the same love, more fully revealed. The New Testament does not correct the Old Testament's picture of love. It completes it.

Common Misunderstandings

Because *love* is used so loosely, several mistaken ideas have found their way into the church.

"Love means never saying no." Biblical love "rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6). It warns, corrects and disciplines. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19). A parent who never says no is not loving the child more, but less.

"Love is love." The slogan treats every desire called love as equally good. Scripture shows that love can be misdirected: love of darkness (John 3:19), love of money (1 Timothy 6:10), love of this present world (2 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:15). Love is good when it is ordered by God and aimed at what He calls good.

"Agape is unconditional; phileo is conditional." As we saw, the words overlap too much to bear that weight. The truth behind the idea is real, though. God's love does not depend on our worth. But that truth comes from God's character and the cross, not from the dictionary.

"I can't love them, because I don't feel it." Feeling is not the starting line. Jesus commands love for enemies, and no one feels warmly toward an enemy at first. We can choose to do them good, pray for them and refuse revenge (Luke 6:27–28). That *is* love.

"I love God, so how I treat people is a separate matter." John will not allow it: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20). Love for God and love for neighbor are two sides of one coin.

"Love is the opposite of truth." Paul prays that our love may abound "more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9), and urges us to speak "the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Love without truth becomes sentimental. Truth without love becomes harsh. Scripture holds them together.

"You have to love yourself first." Many read "love your neighbor as yourself" as a command to build up self-love before we can love others. But the command assumes we already care for ourselves. "No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Ephesians 5:29). The problem Scripture addresses is not too little self-love but too much. In the last days people will be "lovers of self" [*philautos*] (2 Timothy 3:2). The command takes the care we naturally give ourselves and turns it outward: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

Conclusion

Of all the words we have taken a closer look at, *love* may show the widest gap between common usage and Scripture. Our culture says love is a feeling, drawn out by the worth of its object, that approves

whatever the beloved chooses. Scripture says love begins in God, is shown supremely at the cross, is given to the undeserving, and is lived out in obedience and costly action.

The Old and New Testaments tell one story of one love. The God who set His love on a small, stubborn nation and kept His *chesed* through centuries of unfaithfulness is the God who "so loved the world, that he gave his only Son." The New Testament does not replace that love. It reveals it in full and pours it into our hearts through the gift of holy spirit.

As for *agape* and *phileo*, the distinction is real but modest. Neither word carries the meaning on its own. What gives biblical love its meaning is not a Greek word but a person and an act: Jesus Christ, laying down His life.

Some practical takeaways:

- **Define love by looking at God, not at your feelings.** Start with 1 John 4:9–10 and the cross.
- **Measure your love by Christ's, not your own comfort.** "As I have loved you" is the standard.
- **Love by choosing and doing.** When the feelings are not there, act anyway. They often follow.
- **Let love and truth travel together.** Real love can say no, correct and warn.
- **Let the spirit-gift help you know what love calls for.** No written command covers every situation. Operated in love, the gift of holy spirit can help you know what love requires in the moment.
- **Rest in His love before you try to give yours.** "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

We began with faith and hope. Paul brings all three together and tells us which is greatest:

> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Regarding faith: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8–9). Regarding hope: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). One day faith will become sight, and hope will be fulfilled. Love alone will remain, because love is not merely something God does; it is who he is. "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Key verses to remember

Passage	What it shows about love
Deuteronomy 7:7–8	God's love begins in His choice, not our worth.
Exodus 34:6–7	God abounds in steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness.
Lamentations 3:22–23	God's steadfast love never ceases.
Jeremiah 31:3	God's love is everlasting and faithful.
John 3:16	God's love gives.
Romans 5:8	God loved us while we were still sinners.
1 John 4:9–10	The cross defines love.
John 13:34	We love others as Christ loved us.

Passage	What it shows about love
1 Corinthians 13:4–7	Love is known by how it treats people.
Ephesians 5:2	Walk in love, as Christ loved us.