



In Greek, the Greatest Commandment isn't About "Love"

Description



I put love in quotes because our English word "love" has a

lot of linguistic baggage. It has so many meanings it's almost meaningless these days.

Not so with the Greek word(s).

Like a lot of Greek words, it has a specific and technical meaning that is often completely lost on English readers. In my humble opinion, The Greatest Commandment is the second worst case of mistranslation in the entire Bible.

The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-40

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

37 And he said to him, “You shall **love** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

38 This is the great and first commandment.

39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now that we know what we’re talking about, let’s break down the words.

Our English Word “love”

According to [Merriam-Webster's dictionary](#), love means:

1. **strong affection** for another arising out of kinship or personal ties
2. **attraction** based on sexual desire : affection and tenderness felt by lovers
3. **affection** based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests
4. unselfish loyal and benevolent **concern** for the good of another

I would like to point out that in English, the word “love” is primarily concerned with feelings of attraction or affection. Our word Love is nearly always a noun (*person, place, thing, or feeling*) and rarely a verb (*action*). It can be a verb, but typical usage is primarily feelings based.

That would make The Greatest Commandment primarily based on how we feel about God, not what we do. That stands in complete opposition to the Greek word in this passage.

The four Greek words for “Love”

Again, I put ‘love’ in quotes because the Greek words for love don’t necessarily have the same meaning as our English word.

“??????” (**storgé**). It’s used twice in the New Testament with a negative prefix (like **amoral**, meaning *not moral*). The version with the negative prefix is “????????” (**astorgos**) means “without natural affection”, referring primarily to family. i.e. “not loving their family”.

“?????” (**eros**). Eros is the root of our word “erotic” and it refers specifically to sexual love. It does not occur in the Bible. (*it also doesn’t refer to “romantic love”; only sexual love*)

“?????” (**phileó**). is the closest to our English word love, but doesn’t have a romantic connotation. It’s used of friends and means “*to show warm affection in intimate friendship, characterized by tender, heartfelt consideration and kinship.*” It can also be used of things as in Matthew 6:5, where the hypocrites “love” (*phileó*) to be seen praying. **Notice that phileó is very close to our English word “love”; only it lacks the romantic component.** (*Suggesting a close friendship instead of romantic attraction*)

“?????” (**agapé**). This is the word Jesus uses in The Greatest Commandment, only He uses the verb form “?????” (**agapaó**).

As usual, Strong’s Concordance gets the definition of agapé completely wrong. The ever popular BlueLetterBible.org is based around Strong’s Concordance, and so gets it equally wrong too... as usual (*though at least they also have Thayer’s Greek Lexicon at the bottom of the page*)

But here is what Strong’s says: (*just realize it’s wrong*)

1. of persons
 1. to welcome, to entertain, **to be fond of, to love dearly**
2. of things
 1. **to be well pleased, to be contented at or with a thing**

The Strong’s definition of agapé leaves you with the same definition as phileó or our English word love. i.e. it’s primarily about feelings. However, that is **not** what Jesus said. Feelings are nouns. However agapé isn’t a noun in the Greatest Commandment; it’s a verb.

Further, agapé doesn’t even refer to feelings in the noun form.

Most people will tell you agapé refers to “sacrificial love”, with the idea that you ~~love~~ “*have such strong affection/phileó for*” someone that you’d die for them. A quick Google search will confirm this is the commonly held view. However, no one quotes an actual Greek lexicon when they define agapé.

I will.

The Greek Word Agapé (*translated love in The Greatest Commandment*)

In Homer’s epic story The Odyssey, our hero returns home after 20 years to find his house filled with ruffians. He disguises himself to infiltrate, then kicks them all out. He convinces his wife that it’s him,

and she says this:

[Homer's The Odyssey Book XXIII, lines 213-215.](#)

Don't be angry, or upset, because I didn't give you this **welcome (agapé)** the moment I saw you.

[\(You can even read it in Greek if you have the knowledge.\)](#)

Hmm, doesn't sound like "love" does it? I quoted this bit of Ancient Greek literature to show the actual Greek usage of agapé isn't what you've been taught in church or seen translated in your Bible.

Note: Greek words have different forms depending on their function. Specifically, agapé has two forms that are relevant here:

- agap**é** – is the noun form
- agap**á?** – is the verb form

With that in mind, let's look at the definition in the noun form.

26 agáp? – properly, *love which centers in **moral preference***. So too in secular ancient Greek, **26 (agáp?) focuses on **preference****; likewise the verb form (**25 /agapá?**) in antiquity meant **"to prefer"** (TDNT, 7). In the NT, **26 (agáp?)** typically refers to *divine love* (= **what God prefers**).

Now let's look at the verb form, which **is** used in The Greatest Commandment.

25 agapá? – properly, **to prefer**, to love; for the believer, *preferring to "live through Christ"* (1 Jn 4:9,10), i.e. **embracing God's will (**choosing His choices**) and obeying them through His power**. **25 (agapá?)** preeminently refers to what *God prefers* as He "is love" (1 Jn 4:8,16). **See 26 (agap?)**.

With the believer, **25 /agapá? ("to love") means actively doing what the Lord prefers, with Him (by His power and direction)**. True **25 /agapá?** ("loving") is always *defined by God* – a "*discriminating affection which involves choice and selection*" (WS, 477). 1 Jn 4:8,16,17 for example convey how loving ("preferring," **25 /agapá?**) is Christ *living His life through* the believer.

In The Odyssey quote above, the wife was apologizing for not "showing preference" to her husband the moment she saw him. (*because he was disguised and thus she didn't recognize him*) Her feelings for her husband never changed; she was apologizing for her actions.

I'll re-quote the most relevant part of the definition:

Agapá? means actively doing what the Lord prefers

It's not about feelings.

It never has been.

It's about actions; it's about choice. God wants us to actively choose Him over everything else. It's The Greatest Commandment.

Matthew 22:37-38

37 And he said to him, "You shall ~~love~~ **show preference for** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

38 This is the great and first commandment.

The Greatest Commandment is to actively show preference for what God wants instead of what you (or anyone else) wants... and to do this with everything you have and everything you are.

This commandment is unlimited in scope.

It applies to everything.

For example, in several places the Bible tells us to obey the governing authorities.

Romans 13:1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

Titus 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed,

1 Peter 2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,



It's God's preference that you obey the government... and that includes

speed limit signs. I picked speeding because it's a "little sin" that almost everyone does... but it's still a violation of The Greatest Commandment.

The command to obey governments – unlike The Greatest Commandment – isn't unlimited in scope. If a government requires you to do something that God wouldn't prefer (*immorality/sin*), then you are required to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

However, Last time I checked the Bible doesn't forbid speed limit signs. Therefore, "showing preference" to your desire to speed above God's desire that you obey the government is breaking The Greatest Commandment.

In fact, all sin – big or small – is a violation of The Greatest Commandment.

Sin – by definition – is doing something that God doesn't want you to do. When you sin, you show preference to something else before God. That violates The Greatest Commandment. You might be tempted, but as long as you don't act on the temptation sin doesn't take place.

(We know this because Jesus was tempted yet never sinned.)

Again, it's not about how you feel; it's about how you behave.

Please don't misunderstand me, I absolutely believe that God cares how you feel. In fact, He cares more than anyone else. He is the "Wonderful Counselor" and he heals the brokenhearted.

However...

God is more concerned about your behavior than your feelings

We know this because discipline doesn't make us feel good; it makes us behave rightly.

Hebrews 12:6 & 9-11

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”.

9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but **He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.**

11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

My late father used to say:

Where the Bible says “do”, do. Where the Bible says “don’t”, don’t. Everything else is between you and your conscience

The end of it is this: Show preference to what God wants in everything you do. That is the Greatest Commandment.

The Second Greatest Commandment

Like the greatest commandment quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5, so too the second greatest commandment is also a quotation of the Mosaic Law (*specifically* [Leviticus 19:18](#))

Matthew 22:39-40

39 And a second is like it: You shall ~~love~~ **show preference to** your neighbor as yourself.

40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Just like the command to obey government isn’t unlimited, neither is the command to “show preference” to your neighbor. The Second Greatest Commandment is qualified by the phrase “as yourself”.

Show preference to your neighbor as yourself.

In Matthew 7, Jesus gives what has become known as the Golden Rule. (*and no, it’s not “the one with the gold makes the rules.”*)

Matthew 7:12

12 “So **whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them**, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Few people know that the “Golden Rule” wasn’t quite original to Jesus Himself. The idea goes back to [Rabbi Hillel](#) a few decades before Jesus time. (*Hillel’s grandson Gamliel mentored the apostle Paul; Gamliel also recommended not persecuting the early church in Acts 5.*)

Rabbi Hillel said it this way:

“**What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man**. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it.” Rabbi Hillel (Talmud Shabbat 31a)

Put simply, that’s how you “show preference to your neighbor as yourself”.

You don’t make your entire life about our neighbor like you do God. However, you are required to show preference to your neighbors in the same way you want them to “show preference” to you.

An encouraging side note

If you are feeling discouraged and like you have trouble trusting God or following Him, you haven’t necessarily violated the Greatest Commandment. Remember, it’s about obedience. It’s about your actions, not your feelings.

We can’t always control our feelings, but we can control our actions.

So keep obeying even when life gets rough; especially when you don’t feel like it. In doing so, you will obey the Greatest Commandment, no matter how you feel.

Conclusion

The Greatest Commandment isn’t about feelings; it’s about actions.

- The greatest Commandment is to “show preference to” what God wants – above what you or anyone else wants – with everything you are and everything you have.
- The Second Greatest Commandment is the Golden Rule: treat other the way you wish to be treated. (*as long as it doesn’t violate the Greatest Commandment.*)

Truly, every command in the entire Bible can basically be summed up by these two commands.