

The More Excellent Way

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“What’s love got to do with it?” This is the question Tina Turner belts out in her distinctive raspy voice as she sings the title to the song written by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle, which started being played on the radio in 1984. The “it” the song refers to speaks strictly of gratifying physical desires as if “unburdened” by anything more. But that is NOT what this article is about. And the love I will be speaking to has everything to do with the "it," so to speak, that I will be addressing.

The love that I mean of course is agape.

Agape (love) is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature but one of the most common in the New Testament. This particular Greek word for love, unlike our English word love, never refers to romantic or sexual love. The Greek has *eros* for that, a word that does not appear in the New Testament. Neither does *agape* refer to mere sentiment or a pleasant feeling about something or someone. It does not mean close friendship or brotherly love for which *philia* is used. Nor is *agape* limited in its meaning to be only charity, a word carried over from the Latin by the King James translators and which in English has long been associated only with giving to the needy.

In the New Testament, **chapter thirteen of 1 Corinthians** is itself the best definition of *agape*. Therefore, in **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** we read:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Everything a Christian does should be done in love (**1 Corinthians 16:14**). Correct theology is no substitute for love. Religious works are no substitute for love. Nothing substitutes for love. Christians have no excuse for not loving, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (**Romans 5:5**). It is ridiculous for us as Christians to think that we must manufacture love, since we only have to share the love that we have been given. This love is not of any human origin or teaching, but instead, we are “taught by God to love one another,” (**1 Thessalonians 4:9**). And so, we are told:

- To “pursue love” (**1 Corinthians 14:1**)
- To “put on love” (**Colossians 3:14**)
- To “increase and abound in love” (**1 Thessalonians 3:12, Philippians 1:9**)
- To be sincere in love (**2 Corinthians 8:8**)
- To be unified in love (**Philippians 2:2**)
- To be “earnest” in our love (**1 Peter 4:8**)
- To “stir up one another to love and good works” (**Hebrews 10:24**)

In other words, we are simply to allow God’s love to flow in us and through us.

THE GREATEST POSSIBLE ELOQUENCE WITHOUT LOVE IS NOTHING

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1).

In New Testament times, rites honoring the pagan deities Cybele, Bacchus, and Dionysus included speaking in ecstatic noises that were accompanied by smashing gongs, clanging cymbals, and blaring trumpets. The original recipients of this letter got Paul's point: no matter how well you speak, unless your speaking is done in love, it amounts to no more than those pagan rituals. It is merely meaningless noise in a Christian guise.

PROPHECY, KNOWLEDGE, AND FAITH WITHOUT LOVE ARE NOTHING

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

In this installment, let us consider the loveless heart and work of the prophet Balaam.

Balaam was a prophet of God. He knew the true God, and he knew God's truth, but he had no love for God's people. Without hesitation, it seems, he agreed to curse the Israelites in return for a generous payment by Balak, the king of the Moabites. God told Balaam NOT to go with Balak and do what he was asking, but Balaam went anyway. God tried to stop him but in spite of the severest of obstacles and most unusual of signs (an angel sent to slay him, his donkey talking), Balaam persisted in his stubborn greed. But when the prophet failed to curse Israel, no matter how many times he tried, he resorted to misleading and corrupting them into idolatry and sexual immorality. For these crimes, the LORD killed him (**Numbers 22-25; Revelation 2:14; Numbers 31:8, 16**). The prophet knew God's word, spoke God's word, and feared God in a self-protecting way, but he had no love for God, much less for God's people.

In the next installment, we shall contrast the godly work produced by the love-filled heart of the prophet Jeremiah, and we shall say a few words about the prophet Jonah as well.