

Theology: Love

Love

"They're hopelessly in love."

"I love meatballs."

"I loved Star Wars."

"She was known for her love for the poor."

"Love your enemies."

Clearly, *love* is a pretty flexible word in English. It seems to be able to cover experiences ranging from intense romantic attraction to enjoyment of food and entertainment. Most of our everyday uses of the word refer to some kind of feeling of affection or attraction—but not all of them. Loving the poor, for instance, might not involve any such feelings, and loving one's enemies actually goes against our feelings. Here, love is not warm feelings but rather an unselfish choice to care for another's needs. This enormous range of meaning means that talk of love can invite misunderstanding.

What kind of love does each of the following pictures suggest to you?



What kinds of feelings, choices, and commitments might each involve?

The Bible celebrates all of these kinds of love—its stories embrace feasting, explore the joy and anguish of family bonds, and include erotic poetry. When the New Testament speaks of “faith, hope, and love,” however, the kind of love in view is primarily the kind that involves turning away from self-centeredness and seeking fellowship with God and the well-being of others. Jesus centered his teaching around a call to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourself. In other words, we are to focus not just on our own needs and desires but also on seeking the delight of God and those around us.

One famous passage, often used at weddings but talking about more than romantic love, describes Christian love as follows: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Christians believe that this kind of love echoes the character of God—as another passage puts it, God is love. Therefore, this kind of love should increasingly characterize our way of “being in the world”—our way of treating other people, regardless of our personal attachment to them, and even our way of treating the wider world around us. This includes our lives as teachers and learners, if our teaching and learning turn us from preoccupation with self to openness to God and attentive care for others and the world we share.