

Christmas Gifts - Love - 1 John 4

Let's talk about love for a few minutes. Almost every day we hear somebody use the word. I love you. I love my job. I love the United States. I love cold weather. Love is so common. We probably all use the word and yet we rarely really think about it. The word has a lot of meanings in English. It can have a lot of power or it can be almost meaningless.

If I walked up to one of you ladies this morning, took your hand and looked deep in your eyes and said, "*I love you*" that would be pretty uncomfortable, wouldn't it? Because those words have power. Now, if I walked over to Timmy and took his hand and looked deep in his eyes, he'd probably slug me right then, wouldn't he? Talk about uncomfortable! The word can be powerful. But if somebody says, "*I love peanut butter*" it means almost nothing.

We all love some people and some things. We all want to be loved. We all want to love someone. We need love. We use the word every day and yet most of us would have a hard time even defining what it means. The dictionary can't even decide exactly what it means. It has several definitions: an intense feeling of deep affection or a great interest and pleasure in something; a friendly form of address as in, "*Hello, my love!*" Or it could mean a tennis score of zero. See? It's all over the map. It can mean all kinds of things.

Some school kids were asked what is love and here is a few of their responses: "*When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.*" (Rebecca – age 8) "*Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.*" (Chrissy – age 6) "*Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK.*" (Danny – age 7) "*Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.*" (Tommy – age 6) "*You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot.*" (Jessica – age 8)

We could stop right there. Once again, the best philosophers on the planet have yet to reach puberty. And that reminds me that you have probably heard that the most profound and meaningful and deepest song ever written is "*Jesus loves me this I know.*" That song can be understood to be so profound when you truly understand what love really is, at

least what God's love really is. God's love – agape love – is not a feeling. It's not an interest or a greeting. It is a choice. Feelings come and go. If you can fall into love then you can fall out of it. But when you make the choice to love, it can't be stopped. There's no end to it. You can't be talked out of it. There is no changing it except to grow deeper in it. And that kind of love comes from God and God alone.

We are continuing our look at the Christmas gifts that God gives us this time of year. I bet you can guess which gift we are looking at today. Does anybody remember last week's gift? Hope. What about the week before? Faith. Faith, hope and love. And which of these gifts is the best gift? Love is the best. Even better than a lululemon Everywhere Belt Bag, right? (I Googled the most popular gift this year and it is supposedly a fanny pack??? Seriously?) Anyway, how do you know love is the greatest gift that God can give us? Because you've heard me say it before, right? No. Because Paul said it in **1 Corinthians 13**. Love is the greatest gift. It's the most powerful, most useful, most needed and wanted gift and I'm sorry but Santa ain't bringing it down the chimney this year but you can still have it.

Let's look at an unusual Christmas passage this week. **1 John chapter 4**. 1 John is way in the back. Don't confuse it with the Gospel of John that is after Luke. 1,2,3 John are just after 1 and 2 Peter and just before Jude and Revelation way to the right in your Bibles. This passage explains a lot. I think a lot of people have a problem even believing in God at all because they find it hard to believe that God would have anything to do with us. And I can understand that thinking. But this passage explains that He loves us, He cares for us, He made a way for us to be with Him and because He loves us like that, He expects us to love like He does. Let's read **1 John 4:7-12**.

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

Now, the first time I read this, this is what I got out of it. "Love love love God love love. Love love love lovey dovey God love love. Love and love and love God us love God is love love love God." So, merry Christmas.

Yes, it's kind of wordy but when I read it over and over again, I came to see that it really explains a lot. And the key to understanding this passage is to understand **verse 8**. It says that God is love. And when we read that, we might think that, yes, God is very loving. No, that's not what it is saying. It's not a characteristic of God. It's more like a partial definition of God. It's who He is and why He does and how He works. In other words, because God is love, everything He does is done in love. Even His judgment is done in love.

So, for us at Christmas time it is easy to see that God the Father sent Jesus, the Son, to Earth because He loves us. It says so in **verse 9**. *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* Here we see that the very essence of God is love. It starts with Him. He is the inventor of it. But He also shows it to us by sending Jesus to Earth. And why would He do that? So that we could have real life. He doesn't want us to just get by in this life.

Have you ever known somebody that just was not very loving, like they just didn't know how to do it and couldn't do it? That kind of person is miserable to be around because that person is miserable on the inside. That's no life. Jesus said in John's Gospel that He came so we could have a full and abundant life. Full and abundant means loving and being loved.

I found an interesting quote from C.S. Lewis: *To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin or your selfishness...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell.* (C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960, p.169.)

Profound words, right? But I hear ya. Some people are just hard to love. Some people are just takers, aren't they? They take and take and never give back. And it seems like it's never enough. And for those kinds of people who obviously don't love you, it's hard to love them. Well, I have good news. The good news is you're wrong. It's not hard to love those people. It's impossible! You can't do it.

The really good news about that though is that even though you can't love those unlovable people, God never said to do it in your own strength. Look again at **verse 9**. *He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* And if we are going to live through Him then we have to love through Him as well. We do it in His strength. This is the

time you can quote that popular verse that gets taken out of context so often. Poor **Philippians 4:13**. It gets abused so often. I can win this race through Him who strengthens me. Or I can lift this weight through Him who strengthens me. I can pick up this hot chick through Him who strengthens me. No, no, no. That's not what it means. Yes, it says I can do all things but it means all things that God has called you to do.

I can get through this ordeal. I can have a good attitude. I can not be afraid. I can even love that mean and ugly person who takes advantage of me and gossips about me behind my back. I can even love them through Christ who strengthens me. That is what God calls you to do if you are truly a follower and believer of Him and He will give you the strength and ability to do it.

I read the story of Peter Miller, who lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania and was a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution. In that same city there was a man named Michael Wittman and Wittman was just an evil man. He was constantly doing everything he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Pastor Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the man who he somehow knew was not guilty of the crime he was accused of. *"No, Peter,"* General Washington said. *"I cannot grant you the life of your friend."*

*"My friend!"* exclaimed the old preacher. *"He's the bitterest enemy I have."*

*"What?"* cried Washington. *"You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon."* And he did. Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata--no longer an enemy but a friend. (Lynn Jost)

That's a pretty good illustration of agape love because it shows that the pastor did something. It cost him something. Action was taken. And that is the defining point of what true love is. It is an action word. You can say you love but until you do something, it is just talk. True love is proven by what it does.

There's a really cool story in **1 Samuel 26** where King Saul and his army are chasing David all over creation. And one night while Saul and his army are sleeping in a field, David and his friend Abishai sneak down and go into their camp and see Saul fast asleep. Abishai says to David, *"There he is. Let me go kill him with my spear. I'll run him through."* But David instead gets the water jug and spear that were laying next to Saul and sneaks off with it. And he did it to prove to Saul the next day that he could have killed Saul but he didn't because he had chosen to love him instead.

In **Luke chapter 10** we see the story of the Good Samaritan. You know the story. Two religious people had seen the man laying in the road, beaten and nearly dead and they crossed over to the other side so they didn't have to worry about him. But the Samaritan man stopped, bandaged him up and took him to an inn and paid for the man to stay there until he was healed. He chose to show that man love when there was nothing in it for him. That's agape love.

Those are some good examples of what it means to love people but if we go back to our passage in **1 John** we see an even better example. Look at **verses 9-10** again. *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* God proved He loved us by sending His Son to die for us to make a way for our sins to be paid for and allow us to be with Him in Heaven.

Okay, I want to share with you something I learned in Ben's Bible study several years ago and it just really stuck with me. That word "atoning" in **verse 10** means to make something right that had been wrong. If you do something wrong to somebody and you want to make it right, you atone for that mistake or that sin. It's also called either expiation or propitiation. Both words mean basically the same thing, to pay a price to make something right.

But expiation is a purely legal term. It means the judge has fined you \$1000 for your crime and you paid the \$1000. But propitiation is more personal. Propitiation is where the judge fines you \$1000 and then the judge pulls out his wallet and pays the fine for you. See the difference? Why would the judge do that? Because he loves you. That's why. When the judge is your father he has to sentence you to a just and fair punishment but then he chooses to pay the fine for you. That's what our Heavenly Father has done with Jesus.

He gave Jesus to be the atonement, the propitiation to pay the price the Father said was due for your sins. See, even His judgments are made in love because God is love. In **Romans 3** it says that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. And then in **Romans 5:8** it says that, *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* God demonstrated His love for us because that is what true agape love does. It makes the choice to love even when there is no love returned. It is making the choice to love when there is nothing in it for you. And that's what God expects you to do with His gift of love. Give it away.

Look at **verse 11** again. *11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* God is love. He invented it. It's who he is. It's what He does and since we are made in His image, it's what He expects from us. But He wants to be the power, the force that allows us to do it.

**\*Music\***

So, here's what we are going to do. Let's bow our heads and just spend a few minutes in prayer asking God who He wants us to love. Ask for a name. Is it somebody at work? That crazy neighbor? The relative you can't stand? Who is it?

Now, tell God you can't do it. Don't tell Him you are going to try. Tell Him you can't and that He will have to give you the power, the ability, the desire and the opportunities to do it. Ask Him what it looks like for you. How are you going to prove that you have chosen to love that person? I know they don't deserve it. What's that have to do with it? You don't deserve Jesus and yet He died for you.

Maybe today you have never accepted God's free gift of atonement. You have never given your life completely to Jesus to do as He pleases. All you have to do is believe. But that belief will change your life. Do it right now as the music plays.