

Love is the Message of Christmas

John 3:16

Thesis: We are a people who are deeply loved by God. And, we follow the way of Jesus who gives away the love of God to others freely and extravagantly.

Text: John 3:16; Mark 12:30-31; 1 John 4:7-21

Takeaway: May you experience God's love and presence, and may you get energized to give way God's love to others.

The message of Christmas is God's profound love for you, me, and this world.

John 3:16 (NIV84) "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

When Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment," he replied:

Mark 12:30–31 (NIV84) 30 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

If you have heard of Jesus, you probably know about one of his famous teachings called the Golden Rule. "Do to others what you would want them to do to you" (Luke 6:31). What Jesus said is actually is a restatement of something else he said, which is **the meaning of life is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself** (Mark 12:30-31).

But what does Jesus mean by the word "love"?

Love is an unclear word in English because you can love your mom and you can love pizza. And if the word love means the same thing in both of those cases, your mom's going to feel really bad.

Jesus' Concept of Love

So, what did Jesus mean in his language? Well, first of all, this "love your neighbor" phrase is a quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, where the word for love is "ahavah." However, the language Jesus spoke and taught in from day-to-day was a cousin language of Hebrew, that is, Aramaic. In Aramaic, the word for love is "rakhmah." But

then, as Jesus' followers spread his teachings around the world, they translated them into Greek using the word "agape."

But here's what's fascinating. The earliest followers of Jesus, who wrote books of the New Testament in Greek, they didn't learn the meaning of agape by looking it up in ancient dictionaries. Rather, they looked to the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life to redefine their very concept of love.

Since love is the message of Christmas, what does God say and mean about love as revealed in Jesus?

1. Love is a deep feeling of affection.

- a. God wants us to feel deeply loved, valued, and sought after.
 - i. *Jeremiah 31:3 (NIV84)* *3 The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."*
 - ii. *Luke 19:10 (NIV84)* *"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*

2. Love is an action.

- a. Love is not just something that we fall into or an experience that we have, like "I fell in love."
- b. For Jesus, love is an action, a choice that we make to seek the well-being of people other than ourselves.
 - i. *John 15:13 (NIV84)* *"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."*
 - ii. *Luke 6:27-28 (NIV84)* *"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."*

3. Loving God involves our whole being.

- a. We love God with our heart (affections), mind (intellect), soul (inner person; spirit), and strength (hand; body; embodied) (Mark 12:30-31).

4. Loving God means that we will love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).

- a. We choose to seek the well-being of people and of ourselves.

5. God is love (1 John 4:16).

- a. Christian faith involves trusting that at the center of the universe is a being overflowing with love for his world.
- b. This reality means that the purpose of human existence is to receive this love that has come to us in Jesus and then to give it back out to others.
- c. As we love like this, we create an ecosystem of others-focused, self-giving love.
- d. That is the New Testament meaning of agape love.

Other Scriptures:

John 13:34–35 (NIV84) 34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 14:15–21 (NIV84) 15 “If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”

John 17:24–26 (NIV84) 24 “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. 25 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

1 John 4:7–21 (NIV84) 7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Takeaway: May we be a people who experience God's love and presence, and who are energized to give way God's love to others.

Reflection:

1. **God is love.**
 - a. For God so loved that he gave (John 3:16).
 - b. We cannot give away what we don't experience.
 - i. Q: Are you receiving and experiencing the love of God in such a way that God is transforming you?
 - c. If we are growing in our relationship with the Lord, who is love, we will grow in our ability and capacity to love God and others.
 - i. Q: Are you more loving now than in the past month, year, or years?
2. **Love is defined by what Jesus says, not by what the world says.**
 - a. God is love (1 John 4:16).
 - b. God loves us even when we are broken, vandalized, and fall short.
 - c. God even loves his enemies.
 - d. Jesus invites us to be transformational agents in this world, receiving God's love and giving away love to the broken, vandalized, hurting... and even to our enemies.
 - e. Q: How are you doing in your capacity to love even your enemies?
3. **Love is expressive**, like in Matthew 25 in the teaching of Jesus regarding the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46).
 - a. If we fail to care for the poor (hungry, thirsty, clothes), the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner, then, we have to question if we have encountered the God who is love.
 - b. *Matthew 25:35-36 (NIV84) 35 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*
 - c. Q: How are you expressing the love of God tangibly to the poor, the marginalized, and those in need? Where are you joining Jesus on his mission in your spheres of influence together with others to touch the poor, the marginalized, and those in need?
4. **Loving that which is broken.**
 - a. For God so loved the world. What world?
 - i. God loves this world that is both beautiful and broken.

- ii. This world is full of imperfections, brokenness, and vandalism. At the same time, this world is full of God's glory (Isaiah 60:1-3; Isaiah 6:3; Habakkuk 2:14).
 - iii. There are broken people, broken nations, broken churches, broken systems, etc.
 - b. To become like Jesus is to grow in our capacity to love that which is broken.
 - c. Transformed people have the capacity to love that which is broken, especially broken people, churches, and communities. (*The Four Stages of Church Life* by Steve Meeks.)
 - d. Q: Are you growing in your capacity to love like Jesus, who loves even that which is broken?
5. **Love is experiential, not just intellectual.**
- a. It is one thing to know in our head that God loves me. It is another thing to feel and experience the love of God.
 - b. Testimony: God is rewriting my emotional chemistry and capacity.
 - c. Q: In what ways are you experiencing the love of God?

Invitation:

Ministry Time:

Addendum for Further Reflection: 1 Corinthians 13

<https://bibleproject.com/guides/advent/>

Read

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 NASB 13 If I speak with the tongues of mankind and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give away all my possessions to charity, and if I surrender my body so that I may glory, but do not have love, it does me no good.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous; love does not brag, it is not arrogant. ⁵ It does not act disgracefully, it does not seek its own benefit; it is not provoked, does not keep an account of a wrong suffered, ⁶ it does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ it keeps every confidence, it believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away with; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away with. ⁹ For we know in part and prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Consider

At weddings or other occasions where love is in the air, you might hear words from 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul's most famous writing about love. "Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous; love does not brag, it is not arrogant" (1 Cor. 13:4). But 1 Corinthians 13 does not focus on what we call "romantic" love; instead, it describes a love that holds communities together when deep divisions threaten to tear them apart. Paul is writing to a Corinthian community that has fractured, with high-status people receiving privileges denied to others. Some members are elevating themselves by boasting about their spiritual gifts—that is, Spirit-empowered abilities like spontaneously communicating in foreign languages or speaking the words of God to people—while others are being excluded or branded as lesser.

Paul reminds everyone that spiritual gifts are for the benefit of others, not for boosting personal status. Although they are powerful, they mean nothing if they aren't compelled by love, a love that "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:7, NIV).

For Paul, love is the rugged commitment to relate rightly with people and seek their good. It bears with others' shortcomings and refuses to dominate or keep score. Advent reminds us that this kind of love is grounded in the hope that God is working to renew all things and will one day fully establish his Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven. As we practice this way of love, friends, neighbors, and even enemies can glimpse that future reality.

In the end, it's not prowess, power, or performance that will last. It's love.

Reflect

Of the many aspects of love described in 1 Corinthians 13, which encourages or inspires you the most, and which seems most difficult to put into practice?