

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS: LOVE

John 3:16-17

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, December 11, 2011

We sometimes have a difficult time describing human love, but some children ages 4-8 defined it beautifully well for us. It was a contest to find the most caring child. A group of professional people asked the children, "What does love mean?" Here are their answers:

'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

'When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.' Billy - age 4

'Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.' Karl - age 5

'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 what makes you smile when you're tired.' Terri - age 4

'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 when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing, you still want to be together and you talk more. My Mommy and Daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss'. Emily - age 8

'Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.' Bobby - age 7

'If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate.' Nikka - age 6 (we need a few million more Nikka's on this planet)

'Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday.' Noelle - 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

'During my piano recital, I was on a stage and I was scared. I looked at all the people watching me and saw my daddy waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore.' Cindy - age 8

The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his Mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, 'Nothing, I just helped him cry'.

Christmas is a time when we think of those we love and the gifts we want to give. I want you to think with me about how we give and then how God gave the gift of his love that we celebrate in the birth of his son.

WHEN WE PLAN A GIFT WE SEEK TO FIND SOMETHING THAT THE PERSON NEEDS OR WANTS. We call our children and ask what our grandchildren need this year. We ask one spouse what the other needs. This is the beginning of ideas for our search. What have they talked about that they would like to have?

God knew our need when he sent Christ to be born in Bethlehem. Look at how the Bible describes why Jesus came. Luke 19:10 – “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” John 10:10 – “I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

God created man and woman and made them perfect. There were no problems physically, emotionally, or spiritually. There was no need or want in this state of perfection. But they messed up their lives by disobeying the Creator and needs and wants of all kinds flooded their lives. They were marred physically, emotionally, and spiritually. So, everything about them required redemption. Physically, they would get sick, age, and die. Emotionally, they would feel deficient and would always be looking for love and significance. Spiritually, they would be dead to a relationship with God and have no way to reach him on their own.

When God sent Jesus to Bethlehem to be born of Mary, it was a gift of love designed to save us from our sin and to give us a life worth living.

WHEN WE GIVE A GIFT WE WANT IT TO BE PERSONAL. God’s gift of love is to all of us but primarily to each of us. John 3:16, 17 is what Jesus said to one man, Nicodemus. “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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” The term “world” means all of us. The word “whoever” means each of us. I John 4:9-10 describes it this way: “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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” There is a sense in which we may sin collectively, but sin is always accountable personally and has to be paid for personally. So Jesus came for each of us, personally. Bethlehem is yours personally. The cross is yours personally. The resurrection is yours personally.

Anna Warner wrote the poem to a sick child and William Bradbury set it to music. We learned it as a child and sang it to our children. Now as adults we sing it to ourselves to be reminded of his love. Dr. Karl Barth, a theologian who had written thousands of pages theology was asked, “What is the greatest theological thought that has ever entered your mind?” He answered, “Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so; little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong.
Jesus loves me! He who died heaven’s gates to open wide! He will wash away my sin, let his little child come in.
Jesus loves me! Loves me still, though I’m very weak and ill; from his shining throne on high, comes to watch me where I lie.

Jesus loves me! He will stay close beside me all the way, if I love him when I die He will take me home on high.
Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus love me, the Bible tells me so.

WHEN WE GIVE A GIFT WE CONSIDER HOW IT IS PRESENTED. You would not give a gift of a diamond necklace and leave it on the kitchen counter with a note saying, “I hope you like this.” No, you would plan a romantic setting in a special evening with a dinner at your favorite restaurant and then present it to her with a card expressing your devoted love. Look how God presented his gift. It was a special night. Luke describes it this way: “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An Angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:8-14.

WHEN WE GIVE A GIFT WE MAKE IT UNCONDITIONAL. We make it with no strings attached. The receiver simply has to receive it. God gives his love unconditionally. It simply has to be received. It can also be rejected. A gift of love given like this is expected to be received. “But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were yet still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” I John 3:1.

You can either receive or reject God's love. It is displayed on every person on the earth. Knowing this has several effects on me. It affects how I relate to the Lord. He loves me and I have come to realize it and I freely submit myself to him. It affects how I think about myself. Love communicates worth not worthiness. It tells me that for God to love me I must be of worth to him. This gives me a sense of purpose and significance. It also affects how I view the church. The church is a company of the redeemed just like me. We all came to Christ through the cross. We were all born again into this heavenly family which makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. God's love to me also affects how I relate to the lost. I cannot be comfortable with just my salvation for the saved are responsible for the unsaved to live before them a life that would attract them to Christ and to lead them to a personal relationship to him just like I have.

But all of this is unconditional. God loves me regardless of my response to him. If I do respond to him with my love it makes all the difference in my life and I do so unconditionally. We will not be like the young man who said to his girlfriend, "Sweetheart, if this world was as hot as the Sahara desert, I would crawl on my knees through the burning sand to come to you. If the world would be like the Atlantic Ocean, I would swim through shark infested waters to come to you. I would fight the fiercest dragon to be by your side. I will see you on Thursday if it does not rain."

Conditional responses to our Lord rob the Christian life of all of its power.

WHEN WE GIVE A GIFT IT IS REPRESENTATIVE OF OUR CHARACTER. We will either be thought of as Scrooge or as Mary of Bethany who gave back to Jesus her deepest love for his gift of eternal life. Whatever we give is a reflection of our being and character. It is God's character to love lavishly, thoroughly, truly, and without reserve. Jesus said it for us on the human level, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." John 15:13. There is no greater love than that which came down at Christmas.

A candy maker in Indiana wanted to make a candy that would help us remember who Christmas is really about. So he made a Christmas Candy Cane. He incorporated several symbols for the birth, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. He began with a stick of pure white, hard candy: white to symbolize the virgin birth and sinless nature of Jesus; hard candy to symbolize the solid rock, the foundation of the Church, and firmness of the promises of God. The candy maker made the candy in the form of a "J" to represent the name of Jesus. It also represented the staff of the "Good Shepherd". The candy maker then included red stripes. He used three small stripes and a large red stripe to represent the suffering Christ endured at the end of his life. The candy became known as a Candy Cane -- a decoration seen at Christmas time.

God's gift of his Son to us is representative of his character of love. Once you ever get the concept that you are loved you can never get away from it.

In the days when the great evangelist Moody was preaching in Chicago, a man, partially under the influence of liquor, seeing the warm lights of Moody's tabernacle, staggered up the steps to the front door. Upon opening it, he saw no one within, but he did see the motto hanging above the pulpit: "God Is Love." The man slammed the door, staggered down the steps, and muttered to himself, "God is love? God is not love. If God were love, He would love me, and He hates me."

He continued his uneven walk around the block, still muttering to himself. But those words began to burn images into his benumbed thinking. A power seemed to draw him back to the tabernacle. With the throngs that were now making their way into the tabernacle, he soon found himself seated inside, and Mr. Moody was preaching.

The sermon over, Moody made his way to the door to shake hands with the people as they left. But this man didn't leave. He continued to sit in his seat, weeping. Moody came over to him, put his arm on the man's shoulder, and asked, "Is there something that I can do for you? What was it in my sermon that touched your heart?"

"Oh, Mr. Moody, I didn't hear a word that you spoke tonight," the man responded. "It's those words up there over your pulpit—"God Is Love."

Moody sat down and talked with him for a while, and soon he gave his heart to Moody's God.

God is love. All His ways and acts are love. Praise Be To His Name!