

Love

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Date: 24 December 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. And as always, you can check us out on our website, FCCGreensburg.com, or you can check out the FCC Greensburg Facebook page.

But hey, thank you so much for tuning in today to hear the Word of God preached. And it's always my prayer that God will take His Word and just mold and shape us by His Word into the image of Jesus Christ more and more every day.

Now, as you open up your Bibles for me today to Luke chapter 2, I want to take you way, way back to the year 2020. Now, I have a feeling that some of you remember that year pretty well, but we had just moved into our home that summer.

At the beginning of December, our youngest, Lila, was born. And when we woke up that Christmas morning, I felt this chill on my nose that I didn't expect.

I walked over to the thermostat. It was 54 degrees in the house, mind you, with a newborn three and seven-year-old at the time. And it's one of those moments where you're like, please be the batteries, please be the batteries in the thermostat.

[1 : 15] But that didn't work. And then I thought, you know, we have a guy in our church who does this for a living. I hate to bother him on Christmas morning, but maybe he could just take five minutes and help me.

Maybe it's something simple that he can explain over the phone. And even though he had young children as well, they were probably opening presents, he was gracious enough to take my call. He had me try a few things, but still nothing would kick on the furnace. And then he said something that I never expected. After talking to his wife, he said, well, I'll just come over real quick and look at it and see what I can do.

Mind you, it's Christmas morning. I never in a million years expected him to leave his own wife and kids to make sure that I had heat. In fact, I told him, please don't do that.

We are fine. We can bundle the kids up and open presents. And then we can go over to my parents. But he insisted. Within an hour, as our kids are bundled up, opening presents with coats and gloves on, he arrives.

[2 : 19] After looking it over, he found a bigger problem that needed some parts you couldn't get on Christmas Day. However, he was able to bypass some stuff and get our heat working again.

And I'll never forget the smile on his face when he came in the door. But even more so, the sacrifice from him, his wife, and his kids so that my family could enjoy Christmas in our living room.

And to be honest, Bethany and I both had tears in our eyes as we were the recipient of a true act of love. And every year around Christmas time, we can't help but to think about the love that was shown to us by this godly family.

Now today, as we come to the last week of our series called Christmas Characters, we're going to look at this word, love. Probably the most misunderstood word in the English language.

A word that a lot of people seem to think they get to redefine in their own terms. A word that's been used as a weapon for evil, a force for good, a reason to follow Jesus, or a falsely an excuse not to submit to him.

[3 : 28] And yet, I'm not worried today about how love is often misconstrued. I want to talk about what it looks like when love is a force for good, a force for God.

Now, I put out a few questions on Facebook last week and many of my friends chimed in with some helpful responses. One question asked, what is the most thoughtful way someone has shown you godly love?

And a sweet, sweet lady who has battled cancer for years now, and although it's taken its toll, she continues to trust the Lord, fight with the heart of a warrior, she put it like this.

She said, doing for me what I cannot do for myself, without me asking for help, unconditional gift of love. Another man, going back to his college years, said, when I got kicked out of school, completely dishonoring myself, I had not one, but two friends who asked me to come and spend time with them.

Not to berate me, but to let me know the world wasn't ending. Someone else simply said, a smile, while another talked about a Bible study group that helped them pack and move their belongings to a new home.

[4 : 41] I asked another friend, what from your family and Christmas traditions remind you of the love of Christ? And I got a few responses. A few people from different churches spoke of Christmas Eve services by candlelight, singing songs like Silent Night or Peace, Peace.

Even the mention of a wonderful live nativity that they do at New Point Christian Church each year. A young man who grew up at our church said, the posture of my parents' heart.

They've always had this open door policy for whoever comes into their home, Christmas time or otherwise. And they love people so well once they're there.

And I would agree as a person who's been in that home many times. But the first question I asked takes us to the ultimate act of love. When you think of this Christmas season and this concept of love, what comes to your mind?

And this is where a lot of people declared the same idea. A lady in our church said, you know, Mary's love for her baby, accepting the task to raise a baby that she knows is meant for sacrifice.

[5 : 54] Another woman said, the pure vulnerability and surrender of God's love to us. He could have come in any form but chose a baby in the humblest of circumstances.

And then last, a friend from South Carolina says, God sending his son to earth to die for us, the unexplainable gift of love.

And so today, you're probably like me being pulled in all different directions. And while this can be a very special time of year, it can also be one of the most stressful and overwhelming times where some of us probably struggle to truly enjoy the love of Christ, whether it's busyness or heartache that we struggle with.

So I give you permission today. And probably a better way to say that is God gives you permission today to take a deep breath to at least, for the next 30 minutes or so, forget all about the places that you have to be and just soak up the love of Christ.

So let's look at Luke chapter 2, starting in verse 1, and we're going to read the Christmas story.

Luke 2, verse 1. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

[7 : 13] This was the first census that took place while Quirinius, or even before Quirinius, was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, to the town of David, because he belonged to the house and the line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And if you have your outline this morning, and don't forget, you can always go to the Y-O-U, so U-Version, U-Version Bible app.

It's free to download. It's incredible. You can go to the menu, click on Events, click on First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana, and then you can see our outline. But as we look at Jesus, the ultimate character in the Christmas story, there are just three simple things that I want us to get, not just in our brains, but also in our hearts as well.

[8 : 26] So to quote a Bob Goff book, the first point goes like this, Love does. Love does. God the Father saw our helpless state.

He knew the separation that sin caused between He and us on this earth and for eternity. He had constantly sent prophets throughout the Old Testament period to redirect our hearts from the selfish and rules-driven religion that men loved to put in place.

And yet, people's rebellion continued to neglect the intimate relationship that God desires with each of us. And when He could have washed His hands of us, He chose instead sacrificial love.

He chose to act because love does. And in one sense, here's where it began. Joseph and Mary, a very pregnant Mary at that, traveling 70 to 80 miles from Nazareth in northern Israel to Bethlehem in southern Israel.

A trip like that today by bus probably takes, I don't know, probably around two hours. But in the days where you walked everywhere you went, I mean, I'm just guessing, but that's probably a six to eight day trip for this couple, especially with Mary being very pregnant.

[9 : 45] And don't get confused either when it says they went up from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea because while they were heading south, the land elevation actually goes up.

And the whole reason they were heading to Bethlehem is because a census was being taken. They were being ordered by Rome to be a part of this. The Jewish authorities would have required them to go to certain cities depending on what tribe and family line you came through.

And when they arrived, Mary was ready to pop. Said like a true man, right? There was no room for them in the inn.

And so they had to stay among the animals where Jesus would have been placed, not in a wood manger like we often see, but most likely in a stone one. And here we are again.

Here we are again colliding with hope, peace, joy, and love coming into this world in the most unexpected and tangible of ways.

[10 : 52] In fact, the very name Jesus literally means God saves or the Lord is my salvation. And I love Acts 4.12 because it preaches this message loudly.

And bye-bye universalism here, okay? Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Only the name of Jesus our Messiah and Lord because love does, because love does, Jesus left the glory of heaven to come into this dreary world to offer us the most amazing gift of salvation.

He forgives us sins, His grace daily covers us, His purpose and power guide us, and we see the ultimate act of love shown to us by the cross of Christ where the Savior of the world was born to die, where the Savior of the world could have called down legions of angels to rescue Him with power like we've never seen before with our eyes, where the Savior of the world had to suffer not because He had sinned, but because we do to take the punishment our sins deserve and rise again three days later so that you and I could be set free and dwell forever in eternal paradise.

And listen, it doesn't matter if you're as rich as Elon Musk, as famous as the soccer star Lionel Messi, or as attractive as the latest movie star.

[12 : 31] The only thing that matters in the end is whether by faith you've surrendered your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And the reason we have the privilege to do so is because Jesus came into this world with the ultimate love because love does.

Or to put it a little hillbilly-ish, love done did in the form of Jesus on the cross and busting out of that tomb and resurrecting from the dead.

But now let's get practical here. That old 1990s rock song Love Hurts, and I'm probably just putting this in your head right now, Love Hurts is absolutely true.

And the cool thing is that it was sung by a group called Nazareth, which fits really well with the Christmas story. But listen, it's easy to talk about godly love. It's easy to come to church and preach on it and everybody feels ooey and gooey, but living out love in very practical ways is really hard because we're all wired a little differently because we may have different views on things like politics and government because people are messy, selfish, and demanding.

And listen, I'm talking about you and I'm talking about me. And yet we're called still to love. Love is a verb. Love does.

[13 : 57] Love calls us to follow the Holy Spirit's leading and enrich others with the same intentionality, selflessness, and grace our Savior has shown us.

And I'm not sure who God is putting in your head right now, but I bet you it's on purpose. And He calls us to love not only in our own power, but also in the power of Christ.

Even people who not necessarily are easy to love, but people who are hard to love, who seem unlovable. See, love does.

And we see that first in what Jesus did coming to this world to be the ultimate sacrifice to take our sins away. Next, the Christmas story shows us that love's here.

Love is here. Now let's look back at Luke chapter 2 and I want you to pick up with me here in verse 8. It says, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

[15:04] 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 that will cause great joy for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

And then we have a few verses here where they get to experience all these angels before them.

And now look down to verse 16 of Luke 2. It says, After this angel experience was over, so they hurried off and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger.

You know, I've always connected with the story of the shepherds. And if you understand how they were viewed, it's safe to say that they were on the bottom rung of the societal ladder.

I wouldn't say that they were absolutely despised, even though they might have been by some, but they were just kind of looked at as less than. Maybe even just forgotten by people.

[16:13] And yet, what a tremendous statement God makes as these people who would have been ceremonially unclean are the first ones outside of Joseph and Mary to know of the Messiah's birth and get to see Him.

To have angels let them know and point them in the way. And then even on the other end of the spectrum in Matthew, we read about the wise men who came from afar to present their gifts to Jesus.

And listen, they would have been the educated, the sophisticated, and even seen like royalty. What we see though here, see in these two opposite extremes, is God is screaming out to humanity that you, you, matter.

Regardless of whether you identify more with the poor and forgotten like Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, or maybe you can relate more to the wise men, or possibly you're somewhere in the middle.

That's probably where most of us are. Those things don't matter to God because they don't matter in the end. So listen, it doesn't matter where you've been, what you've done, how society views you, how much money you make, or what your education level may be.

[17:30] Jesus came for you. And he wants to be more than just a religious duty. He wants, by our repentance, to lavish his salvation all over you as his love meets you this Christmas season.

And here's the thing about salvation. Yeah, it's a decision most of you have probably made to surrender to and be baptized into Christ, but it's also that daily walk of growing, working out our salvation, growing closer to Jesus.

Listen to how 1 Timothy 2, 3-6 says this. It says, This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

For there is one God and one mediator who can reconcile God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time.

So yes, love's here. And I'll just be vulnerable with you for a second. I told you that I often feel like I can relate well to the shepherds. You know, growing up in a very blue-collar family with a dad whose hands were stained black from grease, they did not come clean, chopping wood to heat the house for a decent part of my life, riding in the back of an old pickup truck, never voted most likely to succeed, and yet I wouldn't change that for anything because I'm a child of God just like you are if your heart belongs to Jesus.

[19:10] So love does. Love's here. And last, love shares. Love shares. So let's finish off our passage here in Luke chapter 2 starting here in verse 17.

And here the shepherds are, guys, seeing the Messiah, looking into God's eyes. And here's what the Word of God says. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it, I love this, all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, and she pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Now, these shepherds didn't have fancy theological degrees. In fact, because of their occupation in this culture, we can safely assume that their education level was on the low side.

And yet, it didn't matter because once your life has truly been changed by the love and grace of Christ, you can't help but to want others to know about that same forgiveness and joy and freedom found in the Lord.

[20 : 27] And today, if you're a child of the King, not only can you smile big and worship with enthusiasm, but you have His story to tell others.

And I'll tell you, while December around the church is pretty hectic, it's also such a rewarding time as well for the staff and for the elders. We've shared with you that giveaway Sunday that was a few weeks ago.

As a church, we were able to give sacrificially back to God in the form of over \$36,000 in that one week. And because of that, quite a few families in the church and in the community who just needed a little hand up were able to breathe a little easier at Christmas to feel the love of Christ. Many of the physical neighbors around the church were blessed with a gift card to help with the crazy cost of food. On top of that, we were able to provide over \$11,000 in additional groceries to help people we know and some that we even don't.

We were blessed to present a check to Greensburg Elementary to help children with meals on the weekends. Three local non-profits received a check to keep doing wonderful work in the name of Christ.

[21 : 43] And I'm sure I'm probably forgetting something else. But listen, this is us coming together as the hands and the feet of Jesus to bless our community and tell them a very practical way about the love of Christ.

And it's not about a pastor. It's not about a few people in the church. It's about all of us. And it's not us bragging about this either. It's all God's money anyways.

And hopefully we are just being faithful to give back faithfully like he calls us to do. A small part of what already belongs to him. And listen, our heart is simply to love where God has placed us and try to be a light to share this most amazing story that Jesus came into this world to bring salvation to all.

Now, I'm proud of this church and your heart to share Christ. And honestly, Giveaway Sunday is a microcosm. It's just one small example of the larger heart that you guys have to share Christ.

This year, because you loved your neighbor enough to invite them to church, we saw our average Sunday morning attendance this year go up by 75 people.

[22 : 57] And more importantly than the numbers of bottoms in the seat, okay, we got to witness 40 people baptized into Christ sealed for eternity.

We also saw 35 Christians place their membership and emphatically say, this is my church family. We are seeing people who've never opened the word of God start to go deeper and grow in their faith.

We're seeing people who've walked with Jesus for years go deeper in their faith. We're watching this body come together and wrap their arms around one another when life gets hard and be that support system.

And you're even taking a stand for the truth of God's word in a world that's absolutely crazy at times. And I truly believe that God will continue to bless the work that He is doing in this body of believers if we keep the main thing the main thing and that's Jesus.

As long as we are healthy walking with Christ every day seeking to share the most amazing story about a Savior who came to this earth to bring hope, peace, joy, and love.

[24 : 10] And so I just want to take a special moment on this Christmas Eve to just give you this invitation. I never have a clue all who are listening to me through our audio broadcast.

But I know this. Jesus loves you. He came into this earth as a fragile baby in the most unexpected of ways. Not the way the religious leaders expected.

And He came to bring you hope and peace and joy and love. And He grew into a man. He lived a perfect sinless life.

Came to show us what the kingdom of God was truly all about. And because of greed and power hungry people He was beaten, spit on, a crown of thorns was forced into His skull.

He was forced even though He was suffering greatly from His wounds to carry His cross all the way to Golgotha and there the nails were put in His hands and His feet and He was hoisted up where He

would suffer and die to take your sins and to take mine upon His shoulders.

[25 : 36] And then three days later death is strong but love is stronger. Jesus could be bound no longer and He came busting out of that tomb on the third day alive and ready to show us that there is life in Jesus Christ and in Him alone.

And so as you listen to that invitation, if you are one who has never truly repented of your sins, surrendered your life to Christ, been baptized into Him just like His Word teaches, if you've never made that ultimate commitment to say, Jesus, here's my life, I surrender it to you, today is the perfect day as we celebrate our Savior that He was born to save us, to offer us salvation. And I just want to encourage you, don't wait another day, make that decision today. Pray with me. Heavenly Father, thank you for Luke chapter 2.

Thank you for this simple story of Christmas. And while the world and while each of us can get caught up in all the things that we have made Christmas into, this is what it's all about.

This is the story of Christmas. This baby coming into this world to bring hope and peace and joy and love. So Father, I just pray that You will have Your way in each of our hearts, that You will deal with these hearts and anything there that does not honor You.

[27 : 20] But most of all, I pray that anyone listening to my voice who does not know Your amazing salvation that Lord, today, they will make that decision and they will get connected to a good Bible-believing church and they will get baptized soon and start that journey.

So Father, thank You for what this Christmas season represents. And we give You praise and we give You glory through one name and one name alone, the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

And God's people said, Amen and Amen. Hey, I am so thankful that you've tuned in today. If you want to ask some questions about God and the Bible, if you want to talk about giving your heart to the Lord, reach out.

We would love to come alongside you just like others have done for me. My name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor here at First Christian Church of Greensburg, Indiana. And I just want you to know you can call us in the office Monday through Thursday from 8 to 4.30 and you can call us at 812-663-8488.

That's 812-663-8488. Or you can email me at ray at FCCgreensburg.com. Hey, God bless you and I hope you have a Merry Christmas.