

The Lavishness of Love

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[0:00] So, those of you who are regulars here will know we've been doing a series in Advent to prepare us for the coming of Christ.

And we've focused on joy and peace. And I forgot the other one, but hope. Good one to have at Christmas. And today we're going to be focusing on love. Very appropriate for the last Sunday before Christmas.

And particularly the lavishness of God's love. Wonderful word, lavish. So I'm going to talk about that a bit more in a minute. But I'm going to start by reading from 1 John, chapter 4. It isn't going to be on the screen, so you can just listen.

But some powerful words. I'm sure most of you have heard this passage lots of times before. But it's some very powerful reminders here. And it's one of those ones that you think, well, actually there's half a dozen sermons in here.

You'll be relieved to know I'm only going to preach one of them. And the subtitle for this section in my Bible is God's love and ours. It says, Dear friends, let us love one another.

[1:17] For love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God. And knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God.

Because God is love. 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.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us. And his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us.

[2:12] Because he has given us of his spirit. And we have seen and testify that the father has sent his son to be the saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

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.

Amen. So, I just want to think about this word lavish.

If you go back a chapter to 1 John 3, which when I saw the title, I assumed that was going to be the reading that John would have given me. And then I looked and thought, oh no, it's a different one.

But 1 John chapter 3 talks about how great the love that the father has lavished on us.

That we should be called children of God. And lavish is a good word to think about at Christmas time. Because probably this week some of us are going to lavish our loved ones with gifts.

[3:26] Going to bless them. Going to give them lavish meals. So, just thinking about what that word means. I went back to my dictionary because I'm nerdy like that and I like looking at dictionaries to find out meanings.

But there's two ways of looking at it. So, if you think about it as being an adjective and describing something, it means sumptuously rich, elaborate or luxurious.

So, if you save up and go to a super posh hotel, they might describe it and say, you know, this hotel has a lavish interior and sumptuous bedrooms.

And talk about the lavishness of your experience that you get if you're willing to pay a ridiculous amount of money to experience it. It can also be a verb and that's the sense in which it's used in 1 John 3 about God lavishing his love on us.

It's to bestow something in generous or extravagant quantities. So, for example, giving lots of Christmas presents at Christmas. Giving over and above to people in terms of what they need. [4:33] Being abundant in our generosity towards others. So, I thought I'd talk briefly about Christmas presents and just want to tell you a little story.

This might make me emotional, so Andy Sawyer will be pleased if it does. Talking about lavish generosity. So, I didn't have a picture for this one, so you can look at the presents. I promise you those are not the presents I've wrapped because they're far too neat to be my wrapping. But they do look nice anyway, don't they? And all festive. Well, some of you know I'm quite a creative type.

When I have time, I like to sew, knit, things like that. When I was 10, my grandad bought me a sewing machine for Christmas. One of those old Singer ones, the black and gold ones. I didn't think to take a picture of it. But I still have it, although I don't use it anymore. It was beautiful. It was totally unexpected.

[5:35] It came, he made a sort of big box to keep it in. All wrapped up. I didn't know what on earth this was. And I was absolutely blown away. My grandad delighted in me.

I was the eldest grandchild. I think probably his favourite. But we all think that, don't we? But he delighted in me. He wanted to bless me. He gave in abundance. He lavished his love on me by buying this present for me, which I used loads and loads and was a real blessing to me. The thing that makes me cry is that my grandad died quite unexpectedly about three weeks after Christmas, that Christmas.

So he never got to see me use it. But every time I think about it, I think about my grandad's love for me and the fact that he delighted in me and that he wanted to lavish love upon me.

Now when we compare that to God's love, so I didn't cry properly, when we compare that to God's love, it still pales into insignificance, but it was just a reminder for me of the lavishness of love and abundant generosity.

[6:51] So when we talk about God's love for us, it takes that word lavish to a whole new level. So I can, well, I'll try not to spoil my granddaughter this Christmas because I'll get into trouble, but I could spoil my granddaughter, I could lavish her with gifts and affection and all the rest of it, but it still pales into nothing compared to the lavish love that God bestowed upon us.

Lavish in an earthly sense can always be bettered. So you might save up and go to that posh hotel with the lavish interiors and then you look on the internet and find there's another one that's even better and has got gold taps in the bathroom and whatever and, you know, really posh chocolates on the pillows.

Lavishness in the earthly sense can always be outdone, but it's not so with God's love. God's lavish love for us cannot be bettered.

So we're going to think about some aspects of this love of God and then how we respond to that. There's a little verse in this passage actually that says God is love and that's one of those bits that's a whole sermon in itself.

So if you don't take anything else away from this sermon, remember those three words, God is love. So, the gift of God's love. I was praying and thinking about this and quite an old hymn came back to me, which some of you may know, I'm sure John will know it.

[8:22] But it starts off, it is a thing most wonderful or most too wonderful to be. And we've got some of the words up there. When I looked at it, it got about seven verses.

So I didn't put all of them up. I've just picked out some of the more pertinent ones. But it focuses on God's love for us and our response to him. It is a thing most wonderful or most too wonderful to be that God's own son should come from heaven and die to save a child like me.

I cannot tell how he could love a child so weak and full of sin. His love must be most wonderful if he could die my love to win.

And yet, I want to love thee, Lord. Oh, light the flame within my heart and I will love thee more and more until I see thee as thou art.

As I said, there are several more verses. I think that's the first, third and sixth or something like that. So you can go look it up for yourselves and look at the other verses. But I just picked those ones out as a reminder of the preciousness, the lavishness of God's love for us and the fact that that then stirs our hearts to respond to him.

[9:48] Okay, so I'm going to go on to the next slide. Thank you. So still focusing on the gift of God's love and particularly in response to this passage because there are loads of bits of the Bible that talk about God's love.

Excuse me. So this passage reminds us that God's love is demonstrated through the gift of his son. And we've just been sharing communion together as a very tangible reminder of God's love for us and God's gift of his son to us. Verse nine says, 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.

So we talk about the lavishness of God's love. He loved us so much that he sent his son, excuse me, his son to die for us.

There's a verse in Romans that talks about God demonstrated his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. It wasn't just a small token gift.

[11:04] It wasn't a nice present to put on the Christmas tree and then forget about. But it was the most precious thing he had, the gift of his son. And that demonstrates the breadth and the height of his love, the enormity of his love, the lavishness of his love.

Not only did he send his son into the world, but he sent him to be an atoning sacrifice.

So at the moment, we're thinking about Christmas and if you go into schools, they're doing nativity plays or they were doing nativity plays. And there's lots of stories about tiny baby Jesus in the manger and how cute and how special.

And we sing about the fact that no crying he makes, which is probably a bit unrealistic. But we've got this nice, cosy image of that first Christmas. But we know that the story doesn't stop there.

And one of the really important things of Christmas is that as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we remember that Jesus came for a purpose. He didn't just come so we could ooh and ah over him and knit him little booties.

[12:16] But he came because we needed a way back to God and he came to be that way. Verse 10 says that God, this is love, not that we love God, but he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We had distanced ourselves and separated ourselves from God because of our sinful nature and God loved us so much that he wanted to reconcile us.

And so he sent his son Jesus as a sacrifice in our place. And that's what it means by an atoning sacrifice. That Jesus took upon us our sins. But that's the lavishness of God's love.

That he sent Jesus to take the punishment that should have been ours. And although it seems a bit weird to be talking about Easter at Christmas, actually it's really important that we remember that, that gift of Jesus was for a purpose, that he would take our place on the cross so that we could be reconciled to God.

And importantly, this gift brings us new life. Now, whatever you put under the Christmas tree for me on Thursday, I guarantee it's not going to bring me a good new life.

[13:31] You know, it might, if I get some sort of toiletries or something, it might make me look a bit younger briefly, although I'm not sure how well these things work. But it won't bring me new life.

But the gift that God gives us, the lavish gift that he gives, brings us new life. 2 Corinthians 5.17 says that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.

The old has gone and the new has come. Michelle and I, and Sophie, went and did the park run yesterday. I don't know if Sophie, because she's young and healthy, but Michelle and I were moaning this morning about our aches and pains.

And, you know, being a new creation sounds very attractive, actually, some days. But I think it's more in spiritual terms than in terms of our physical body. But we are going to be a new creation in Christ.

Or sorry, we are a new creation in Christ. And that's the gift of God's lavish love. This passage also speaks, next slide please, Josh, about the assurance of God's love.

[14:35] Going back to the story about my grandad, I knew my grandad loved me because he spent time with me, he made a fuss of me, he gave me gifts, he thought about the things that interested me, and he was interested in those things too.

But this passage reminds us that we can have an assurance of God's love, which is much more significant. We can know this because God's, firstly, because God's Holy Spirit lives within us. Verse 13 says, this is how we know that we live in him and he in us. He's given us of his Spirit. Not only did he bless us by sending Jesus, but when Jesus ascended back to heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit to remind us that we belong to God and that we can live in him and he in us. He, the Holy Spirit, reminds us that we are God's children. Romans 8 verse 16 talks about the Spirit himself testifying with our spirit that we are God's children. Sometimes if we're not focusing on God and we're not listening to him, it's easy to doubt that and forget that significance that we are his children. But that's why his Spirit is there and we need to learn to be attentive.

[15:52] His Spirit and continue being attentive and listening because he will remind us, you know, you are God's child. He loves you. He has bought you at great cost, but you belong to him.

And that same passage in Romans talks about, by the Spirit, we cry out, Abba, Father, which is a very intimate name for God. We can know God intimately by his Spirit living in us.

There's also a voice that jumped out for me from this passage that talks about we can know and rely on God's love. Not only does God's love outdo all of us in terms of its lavishness, but also in terms of its constancy.

God's love does not fade or fluctuate. It is always there. It is always watching over us. It is always holding us safe. It's always protecting us.

And with great respect, all of you who are my brothers and sisters will let me down sometimes and I will let you down however much I love you. But God's love is constant.

[17:06] God does not let us down. We can know his love and we can rely on his love. He will not have an off day. He will not go off and have a sulk because we've upset him.

His love is constant. His love is eternal. And it's really important that we hold on to that. We can rely on that love. And as I read that verse, it started me thinking about, well, what difference does that make to my life?

You know, it's not just a nice saying. If I can know God's love and I can rely on God's love, how does that affect the way I think about myself, the way I think about God, the way I respond to others?

When life is tough, and some of you will know I've had some tough stuff going on at work, which has settled down now. Thank you, Jesus. But yeah, when things are tough, do I remember that I can rely on God, that I can trust him, that he is faithful and that his love is constant?

So it's a good question to reflect on as we come to Christmas. So let's think a bit more about our response. Next slide, Josh. Thank you.

[18:28] So the outworking of God's love. Because this passage talks a lot about God's love, his lavish love for us, and how we can know that, how we can rely on it, how we can understand that we live in God and he in us.

But actually, it also talks about our response. Verse 7 says, Dear friends, let us love one another. And again, that's one of those things you could have a whole sermon on.

Let's love one another for love comes from God. We are commanded to love one another. God's love for us should motivate and inspire us to love one another.

And our response to God's love for us is to love other people. I thought it was really interesting when I read this passage again because it talks about God loving us, but then it says, let us love one another because of God's love for us.

And you might expect that it would say, let's love God because he loves us, but actually, it's outward looking. Our response to God's love for us should be to love other people.

[19:36] Clearly, we should love God too, but John reminds us in this passage that we need to love one another. and it reminded me of a very famous verse in John 15 when Jesus is talking to his disciples and he

says, by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples because of the love that you have for one another.

And that's a real challenge, isn't it? Because if you read about, people say about Christians and about the church, sometimes they're not very happy about us. And sometimes that's because of the way they are or because they're stubborn and not believing, but sometimes we have to admit that maybe we're not as loving, we don't demonstrate God's love as fully as we should and there's a real challenge to that.

So, you know, when people look at me, do they see God's love shying out or do they see somebody who's had a bad day and is a bit grumpy about it and moaning and whatever or somebody who is selfish and not thinking about others?

What do people see when they look at us? Do they see God's love? And then, knowing about this love and loving one another, we also called to testify to God's love.

John says, we have seen and testified that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world and we've already talked about the fact that God demonstrated his love in sending Jesus to be our Saviour but it's not something we're meant to keep to ourselves, it's something we're meant to share.

[21:10] So God's love is something to be shared. We respond to his love by loving other people but also by telling him about them and clearly, we need to be careful and wise about how we do that and we're not meant to just beat people over the head with a hammer until they give in but we do need to be ready to talk about Jesus and what he's done for us and the facts that he points to God's love.

The passage talks about God who is unseen and yet God or God's love should be seen in a spiritual sense in our love for others.

So there's a real challenge for me, you know, when people look at me do they see God's love? Do they understand God's love? And the passage also talks about God living in us.

One of the outworking of God's love or part of that outworking is that he lives in us. He doesn't live somewhere far away and we have to go and see him and make an appointment but he lives within us.

His love is made complete in us, it says in verse 12. That means it reaches its full expression when we love others. Vicky was, when we were praying before the service Vicky was talking about praying for God's thy will be done and she talked about she suddenly felt God reminding her that that needs to be done through us and in the same way God's love reaches its full expression when we allow it to flow out through us to those around us.

[22:50] Okay, so let's have a little think about what love looks like. If I went round the room and said what does love mean to you we'd probably get almost as many answers as there are people here.

I'm sure you could come up with lots of words to describe love and that's great and I can't give an exhaustive list. There are examples throughout scripture of God's love and how that was demonstrated and this passage focuses on the key thing of Jesus being sent to be the atoning sacrifice but there are lots of other examples of God's love in scripture.

So the things I've chosen to focus on here are mostly based in this passage but it's not meant to be an exhaustive list so please continue to reflect on God's love as you go home and think about other examples in scripture and how they speak to us.

First of all God's love is generous and so our love for one another needs to be generous. God lavished his love on us as it says in the previous chapter and that's why we've called this sermon the lavishness of love.

We're talking about lavishness of God's love. So we need to be lavish in our love for one another as well and generous. Being alert to one another's needs.

[24:23] I think as a fellowship we're quite good at doing that but it's not something to get complacent about. We need to be listening to one another reaching out to one another when we're in need and rejoicing when those needs are met.

we need to be eager to give. It's not about I'll help you because the Bible says I have to but I don't really want to do it. If I do that I'm missing the point.

But let's be eager to give. The Bible talks about God loving a cheerful giver or hilarious giver in some versions which always makes me smile. But we can give to one another.

We can give time. We can give money. We can give skills. We can give hospitality by opening our homes. Sometimes we just need to give a listening ear and knowing that you're listened to can be really valuable and really important.

Sometimes we need to give time to pray but we can give generously to one another and that should be a hallmark of our love for God that we love one another with generosity.

[25:33] It's not so much about the amount of money or amount of time but it's about our willingness to give and the attitude with which we give it. And we all know the parable about the widow's mite and the fact that she gave a very small amount of money in one sense but it was all that she had because she was generous.

So let's be generous, abundant to one another. It also talks in this passage or reminds us that love sometimes is sacrificial.

Not always, sometimes love feels easy. You know, when you've just met your dream person and everything's stars and hearts and it's all lovely and fluffy, it might not feel sacrificial.

When you've been married for how many years and the baby's crying half the night and you're grumpy and the heating's broken down, sometimes love can feel a bit more like hard work.

Obviously never with you, dear. But when we talk about God's love for us, we should never forget what it cost him.

[26:43] God's love was generous but it was also sacrificial and similarly for us, there are times when loving others will be costly and we need to be up for that, we need to be aware of that and we need to ask for God's grace in those situations because it's one thing to give when it doesn't really cost us much but when it gets to that point where it's like, oh this is really difficult for me, I don't want to do this but I can see that I need to meet that person's need, we need to choose to be sacrificial and to do it joyfully.

Love also should be welcoming and inclusive. It talks about being in Christ and loving others and being able to tell others about Jesus but our love for others needs to be welcoming, inclusive in the same way as God is welcoming and inclusive of us.

That doesn't mean that we always disagree with everything that everybody else does but we need to be loving and welcoming and looking to people. God doesn't love us from a distance and therefore we shouldn't be loving one another from a distance.

If you think back, it feels ages ago now but it's only five years since COVID. Remember that? Not being able to see people in person and having to meet over Zoom and WhatsApp and it was really weird.

Our kids are all grown up now so they were all living elsewhere. So consequently we didn't hug our kids for about 15 months probably because you weren't allowed to and none of them were bubbling with us which is fine and they were all safe but it felt really weird loving from a distance and not being able to be close to one another but God's love isn't like that.

[28:45] God is always close to us. We don't have to love him from a distance and so we shouldn't put distance between ourselves and others. This passage talks about how we live in God and he in us and so in the same way we should seek to draw others in to be welcoming to be inclusive.

And I couldn't not talk about love and not mention 1 Corinthians 13. Often used at wedding services. It's quite a challenging passage really and it sounds very nice.

Talking about love but when you dig into it there's some quite tough stuff in there. But it's a really useful template for what love looks like. It's a good passage to sit with and reflect on the qualities and asking God which ones we need to grow in.

Love is not proud, it's not boastful, does not keep the record of wrongs and so on. And usually when I read through that passage there's someone who think well I feel like I'm doing okay with that and there'll always be one that goes hmm maybe I need to work on that a bit more.

But it's a good template for what love should look like. It's a good reminder of what God's abundant love for us looks like. So I'd encourage you to go back to that passage or maybe reflect on some of

the other things that I've said here and just ask God how can I demonstrate your love for those around us?

[30:14] how can I be lavish in my love for others? Particularly over the Christmas season but going forward into next year too. So I thought I would finish with a prayer from Ephesians.

Again it's a passage that you'll probably know well but Paul is praying about the Ephesians and knowing God's love. So I'm going to pray this then we're going to have minutes of quiet and I'm going to invite you in your hearts just to pray it for maybe the person on your left and the person on your right.

If you're sitting on your own look around find somebody to pray for. That's fine and then I'll say a closing prayer. I'm just going to read from slightly before where it says on the slide but it says I pray that out of his glorious riches he, that's my God, may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

[32:00] Amen. Let's just be quiet for a moment and ask for those around us that they will know the fullness of God's love.

Amen.

Father, we want to thank you again for your generous and abundant, lavish love.

Father, thank you that your love is beyond compare, that it's eternal, that it's caring, that it protects, that it cherishes us and delights in us.

And Father, even as we acknowledge that there are no limits to your love, we pray that you would give us a greater understanding of that love. Father, that you'd remind us in this Christmas season of that first Christmas, of the demonstration of your love for us.

[33:27] And Father, as we're reminded of your great love for us, I pray that you'd help us to reach out in generosity and love to others, that you would show us how we can love in a more Christ-like way.

In Jesus' name, amen.