Coming to Terms with Christmas: Love Memory Verse: 1 John 4:19

Dec. 22nd, 2024 Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

**SLIDE 1**

Christmas is only a few days away! As we celebrate the humble arrival of our glorious King, we have been coming to terms with Christmas and taking a close look at some of the words we tend to use in this holiday season. We talked about high and lofty concepts like hope, and peace and joy, but Christmas is not high and lofty…Christmas is grounded, Christmas is the chill of the night wind, the lowing of cattle chewing on straw, the wood and nails of rough manger, the blood, sweat and tears of childbirth. Christmas is the cry of a newborn filling his lungs for the first time.

 Christmas is not glamorous or glittery. Our King is a humble king who came into this world in a veritable barn to a displaced mother and father who were just doing the best they could. And the first on the list to receive the announcement of this earth-changing birth was a group of filthy, smelly shepherds, the lowest of the low. They fit right into the setting of the stable. A very strange throne room indeed.

 But as we celebrate this arrival of Jesus, it is easy to lose touch with the concrete nature of the Christmas event. We begin talking about hope, and peace and joy and rightly so, but these words can become a little bloated and with overuse and over time, they begin to lose their meaning. There has never been a more prominent victim of this abuse of language than the word, “love”.

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 Love has long been a term thrown around by all types of people and used in all types of ways. I love my wife and children, but I also love pizza. I love God and I also love certain movies and certain types of music. We have cultural norms bringing even more confusion to the discussion. You may have heard the popular phrase “Love is Love”. **SLIDE 3**

 Which is another way of saying that the idea of love cannot be defined, nor should we try to define it.

 Honestly, when we want to use the word love in any meaningful way, we really have to take the time to define what it is we really mean…otherwise we leave it up to others to decide what it is we really mean by this slippery word, “love”.

 That is our aim for today. I want to arrive at a biblical definition of love **SLIDE 4** so that, moving forward, we as Christians can be crystal clear about what this word means and why we have a special corner on the market when it comes to love.

 C.S. Lewis divides love into two categories:

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Need-love and Gift-love. Need-love is what a child expresses when it runs to their mother. Gift-love is what we express at Christmas…we extend something good to someone else, not coerced and not begrudgingly.

 The Greek language expresses different facets of love by using different words. In English, we just ball all of these meanings together and conveniently stick to one word: love. This means that, in our language, we need to work extra hard at paying attention to the context. In loving my wife, I may be making a declaration of commitment to our relationship. In loving pizza, I may be expressing hunger.

 While you may be familiar with these Greek terms, a quick review might be in order. To begin, we see the word

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 *phileo* which denotes a love between friends, mutual support, camaraderie. This is famously reflected in our own Philadelphia which was founded as the “city of brotherly love.”

**SLIDE 7**

*Eros* is the Greek term used to indicate the physicality of love. It denotes sexual desire and, while a gift from God and an important dimension to how we understand love, *eros* is also the most dangerous if it is to become unbounded. In English, we might be careful to distinguish love from the word lust.

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We also see the word *storge* which we might refer to as affection. The nativity itself offers a picture of affection as the newborn baby is brought to his mother’s arms, the two able to gaze on one another face to face. Affection brings together both need-love and gift-love. Instantly the child needs the mother, their little stomach needs to be filled and in the same breath, the mother does not hesitate to provide the gift of nutrition and substance to her newborn. Need-love and gift-love come together in this type of affection.

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But the pinnacle of love, the richest idea presented in scripture is the word “*agape”. Agape* describes the very nature of God himself. 1 John 4:8 puts it a simply as possible: “God is love.” θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν

This little verse is hardly helpful on its own, but when we understand the grand story in which these three simply words are found, we can see clearly what is meant by saying God is love.

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*Agape* highlights the self-sacrificial nature of love. It perfectly describes the life of Jesus Christ, who is God almighty, who stepped down from his throne, and who became an infant, helpless and defenseless. We read about that process earlier in Philippians. It was a pretty fragile and risky beginning for God’s plan of salvation. A lot can go wrong when a woman is giving birth in a stable with only her carpenter husband to navigate the process. And yet, after the contractions, after the deliberate deep breathes, after the pain of pushing, Mary and Joseph receive a bundle of love, God’s own *agape* had come into the world.

 Love then is not a feeling,

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 it is the act of giving oneself away for the sake of someone else. It is not a high and lofty concept, it is grounded in the words we speak and the actions we carry out, the way we give of what we have, the way we render aid and support, the way we put others before ourselves. *Agape* is grounded in Christmas.

 Earlier in the intro I stated that Christians have a special corner on the market when it comes to love. What I mean is that Christians actually lay claim to it, love is ours, it belongs to us.

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We have it only because it was given to us. Again 1 John 4:19, we love because God first loved us. Love originates in God, he has given it to us and so it is ours. But of course, we are not called to simply bask in the affectionate glow of God’s love. Remember, *agape* gives itself away. So our lives are to be defined by this same self-sacrificing love. We live as servants.

**SLIDE 13**

 We serve God and others. And we do so because Jesus came at Christmas to be born as a servant. And *agape* is unique because it includes all people. *Phileo* is for friends, *eros* is for husbands and wives, *storge* is for parent and children, but *agape*  encompasses them all. Not only are we to extend *agape* love to friends and spouse and children, but also to annoying people, to those who make us cringe, to those who do not want what is best for us, to those who are not on our side. We are to extends *agape* to our enemies. Jesus teaches us in his sermon on the mount,

**SLIDE 14** Matthew 5:44

 ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν

Love the enemies of you. Not with a brotherly love or even with affection. *Agape* your enemies. Love them the way God loves them. Love in a way that gives of yourself.

A good example of enacting love that gives of ourselves, love that chooses the harder way, comes from the story of Corrie ten Boom.

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 Corrie lived in Holland during the upheaval of World War II. Her family had all died in the Nazi concentration camps because they were caught hiding Jews in their home. Somehow Corrie survived. The war had ended, the camps had been liberated, and Corrie was speaking in various churches, sharing about God’s love and faithfulness, even in the midst of horror. She recounts a startling encounter with her past in her autobiography called

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“The Hiding Place”: READ pg. 247

God is our source of love, and his supply never runs low. In these moments, as Corrie was confronted by a great evil from her past, she would have had every right to spit in this man’s face, to declare to all the horrendous and vile things this man had done. At the very least, no one would blame her is she turned away without a word. But Corrie, beyond her own power extended her hand. She gave up her rights to be bitter, her rights as a victim, her rights as someone who mourned her sister. She expressed *agape* even as she had received *agape.*

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Love is never the easy road. Love chooses the harder way. The Son of God being born as one of us, living as one of us and dying as one of us, is certainly the harder way. The way of the cross is the way of *agape.*

In just a few days we will be celebrating Christmas, the event when love came down. But I hope we do not get caught up in a emotional fuzzy type of love that seems to permeate our culture’s view of Christmas. Christ came to extend to us *agape.* He came to live out the hardest way; He came to love his enemies.

Who is in your life right now that you might consider an enemy? Is there someone who seems to be against you? Who wants to see you fall? I want to invite you to come before Jesus, our newborn King and bring with you some prayers for this person or persons. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And as you pray, leave some space to listen intently to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Is he leading you to reach out to this person? Maybe a call or even a written letter? Or maybe you should continue to lift this enemy up in prayer. At the same time, I want to encourage you to forgive the hurt that they may have caused you. This does not mean that you have to be best friends or even that things will go back to the way they were, but it does mean that you choose the harder way. Let us not allow the term “love” to remain as some lofty unreachable concept. Love is grounded in Christmas. It is real. It is concrete. It is not easy. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Let the Holy Spirit empower you to do what is impossible to do on your own. This Christmas let the *agape* of our Lord lead you. Amen.