

Love Came Down

1 John 4:7-12

If we were to ask around, whether at work, or on the street, or even among friends and family, none of us would be surprised to find out that Christmas means some pretty different things to different people. For some it's a very religious experience—going to church, rehearsing the story of the Nativity, celebrating the birth of Jesus. For others, it's a family holiday—a chance to reconnect with loved ones. Or a break from school. Or a major commercial opportunity—a lot of retail businesses finally make their profit during the month of December. And of course, for many of us it's a combination of those things.

But one theme you're bound to hear in anyone's answer, whether they're religious or secular, sentimental or cynical, is that Christmas, at its best, is about love. We sign our greeting cards "with love from the Leverings." Our holiday soundtracks are filled with songs about love: "Christmas Is the Time to Say I Love You," "All I Want for Christmas Is You."¹ Every Hallmark Christmas movie revolves around some love story. And it's not just romantic love, but family and friendship love as well. "I'll Be Home for Christmas." The iconic (albeit elusive) vision of family and friends, gathered round the tree in a home filled with lights and laughter—it's a picture of love. In fact, it's that emphasis on love that often makes Christmas hard for some of us—those who find themselves alone at the holidays, or who have lost loved ones in recent years. We feel or even fear that absence of love, making the holidays bitter sweet at best, or sometimes just bitter.

But if there's anything that people should be able to agree on in this polarized and divided world, it's that Christmas, at its best, is about love.

But what if we were to stop and ask the question, *Why?* Why is Christmas about love? And *what does that mean?* What do we mean by 'love'?²

If you've been with us the past several months at Westgate, then you'll know that we've been talking about love all fall. Specifically, the love that Jesus has for us, and how we see that love displayed in the way that he interacted with people during his earthly ministry. We've been spending our time in the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and meditating on the heart of Jesus and his love for us.

And in light of that, it shouldn't be hard for us to answer the question, *Why is Christmas about love?* "Christmas is about love because Love came down at Christmas. That's why we have

¹ Lissette Mejia, "[Listen to the Ultimate Romantic Christmas Playlist](#)," *Popsugar*, Dec. 17, 2018.

² This introduction was inspired by Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Love Came Down at Christmas* (Good Book Co., 2018), 7-11.

Christmas in the first place!”³ Jesus is *the divine embodiment of love*. He is *love incarnate*, love in the flesh.

Christina Rossetti captured this in her famous poem, “Love came down at Christmas”:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.⁴

Christmas is about love because Love came down at Christmas. Jesus—the personification, the incarnation of love—of divine love, God’s love. And the sign that we recognize him as love, and worship him, is when we reflect his love to others—“to God and all men.”

Rossetti says it beautifully. But the apostle John said it first—in the passage we read a few moments ago. And so what I want to do this morning is look at 1 John 4:7-12 and consider what it means that *Jesus is the divine embodiment of love*. More specifically, how Jesus embodies love through his incarnation—through coming to earth, becoming human, being born into creation—what we celebrate at Christ—and then what difference that makes. Because the reality is, if Jesus is love incarnate, then as much as we talk about love at Christmastime, *we don’t really know love unless we know Jesus, and if we know Jesus, we can’t help but love*.

Let’s look together at this text. If you’re not still there, it’s on page 1023 of the Bible in front of you.

The Call to Love (1 John 4:7, 11)

The letters of John were almost certainly written by the same person who gave us the Gospel of John toward the beginning of the New Testament (along with Revelation at the end),⁵ which means that what we have in these letters is in many ways an application of that earlier Gospel. Wherein his Gospel, John narrated the story of Jesus to convince us “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31), here he is bringing

³ Ferguson, 8.

⁴ Christina Georgina Rossette, 1885.

⁵ On the authorial connection between John’s gospel and John’s letters, see Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 9-14.

that message of Jesus to bear on the daily life of the churches who are seeking to follow Christ. And one of those challenges was how hard it can be to actually love one another.

We're obviously jumping into the middle of the letter, but this is a theme that John has been addressing throughout the book—the call to love one another, and the fact that loving one another is inextricably related to our relationship with Jesus and God's love for us (cf. 2:7-11; 3:11-24).

Perhaps you noticed this in the reading, but our passage begins and ends with a call to love one another. Verse 7: "Beloved, let us love one another . . ." Verse 11: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . ." God wants us to love each other. Again, that's a message everyone can get behind.

But what does that actually mean? What does love look like? That's where, depending on our story, our experiences and background, our views on life, we can find ourselves coming up with some pretty different definitions and expectations. What feels like love to us might not look or feel like love to others.

For instance, if you grew up or operate in a relatively conservative environment, then love is what protects and promotes a good life. Love encourages others to be their best. Love is the fences we build around our children to protect them. It's the rules we enforce to form a moral society. And sanctioning or censuring those who color outside the lines is what we call 'tough love'—so tough, that it sometimes crushes people.

If your experience or story is more progressive or liberal, love is whatever makes someone happy and feel good about themselves. Love removes judgment; it accepts and celebrates everything about someone else. It promotes safety and opposes the idea of sin. The only sin is resisting this vision of love; if you do that, there is no safe place for you to hide.

But is love really whatever we grew up with, or whatever we want it to be? More specifically, does God's love for us mean what we so often make it to mean? Sometimes we see the phrase "God is love," as in v. 8 or v. 16, and we reverse it in our brains—we turn it around and say "love is God." As if to say that the greatest virtue in life, the highest value that trumps any other values or beliefs, is love (though of course, it's what *I* mean by love). But that phrase is not reversible. To say that "love is God" removes God from his throne and replaces him with a squishy idea of our own invention. To say that "God is love" puts the world back in orbit. It reminds us that any talk of love, any practice of real love, begins with God, comes from God, and points back to God. He is the center of gravity. He is the source; he is the standard; he is the strength. A love that it is far more conservative than progressives want to believe—it is inextricably bound up in holiness and moral purity—but far more liberal than traditionalists want to believe—more accepting and self-giving than we can imagine.

And the way we know this love is because God has revealed it to us by sending his Son. Love came down at Christmas. That's what John emphasizes in the heart of our passage, vv. 9-10.

The Divine Embodiment of Love: Jesus Christ (4:9-10)

Look at v. 9 with me: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (4:9-10).

Do you want to know what love is, how we ought to love each other, what God’s love for us looks like? John’s answer: *look at Jesus*. God showed us what love is by sending his one and only Son into the world, the divine embodiment of love.

So what did the Father send Jesus to do? We see two things in these verses. First, he sent him “so that we might live through him.” Love—real love—gives life. It doesn’t steal or kill or destroy (cf. Jn. 10:10); it gives life. And when John uses the word “life” in his letter, he’s not just talking about living and breathing and existing, or even just flourishing on a human level. He’s talking about *eternal life*—an everlasting relationship with God (cf. 1 Jn. 1:2; 2:25; 5:11-13, 20). God, in his love for us, wants to have relationship with us. He wants us to know him intimately. And forever—to enjoy his presence and his blessing for all eternity. That is the goal of love—to know and enjoy God forever.

But think about what that means: if God sent his Son Jesus to come down at Christmas and bring eternal life, that means that apart from Jesus we are facing eternal death. That means that what the Bible says about sin is true—that it separates us from God. That our disobedience and rebellion condemns us to eternal punishment. Which doesn’t make God unloving, any more than it makes a parent unloving who actually has consequences when their child misbehaves. What it does is help us understand how holy God is, and how great his love for us really is, in that he was willing to send *his only Son* to rescue us from the punishment we deserved. Real love gives life.

But how does God do that? How does his love for us result in life, when what we really deserve is death?

We see that in the second reason God sent his Son, in v. 10: “to be the propitiation for our sins.” Real love gives life at great cost to self.

A *propitiation* is an atoning sacrifice. It’s a big word that we don’t typically use today, but it refers to the kind of offering given to God that bears his holy anger against sin. It’s the picture of a substitute paying for us a penalty that we truly deserve. You think of the Passover Lamb for ancient Israel, who died in place of Israel’s firstborn son when God rescued his people from Egypt (cf. Exod. 12). Jesus dies in our place on the cross. The death we deserved, he took on himself in our place.

One of the viral stories going around the web lately is about a stranger paying off the layaway balances at stores for people he doesn’t even know. Those customers owe a debt in order to receive the gifts they’re purchasing; someone else is paying that debt for them. Not because of anything they’ve done, but simply out of the kindness of his heart. It’s a beautiful picture of love. But that display of love is but an echo and a shadow of the love of Christ in giving his life for us. Like the mystery man, he does it not because we deserve it, or because he owes it to us for something we’ve done. “In this is love, *not* that we have loved God, but that he has loved us . . .” (v. 10). But unlike the mystery man, Jesus knows exactly whose debt he’s paying. He knows

every single rotten thing we've ever said or thought or done—all of which is ultimately an offense against him and his throne—and he still pays it anyway. And unlike the mystery man, it's not a few hundred dollars that it costs him, but his very life. Real love gives life at great cost to self. God makes that life available to us by sending his Son. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16).

This is how God defines love. God's love is both moral and merciful. It is holy and gracious. It shows us that sin really is sinful, but grace really is sufficient. It exalts both truth and compassion. It gives life at great cost to self. And God revealed that to us by sending his Son at Christmas, the divine embodiment of love.

And if that's true, if Jesus is love incarnate, then we don't really know love unless we know Jesus and experience his love, and if we know Jesus, we can't help but love one another.

Love in Action (4:7-8, 11-12)

Our ability to love is inextricably linked to our relationship with God. We see this when we look again at the call to love at the beginning and end of our passage. You can't claim to know God if your life isn't marked by love. Verses 7-8: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." And you if you've experienced the love of God in Jesus, you can't help but show it to others. Verses 11-12: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

God's love for us is what makes our love for one another possible. Now of course, anyone can love someone who loves them back, or who does something good for them. That doesn't take a Christmas miracle. But what about loving someone when we don't feel like it? Loving someone who despises us? Loving someone who has hurt us, or might take advantage of us? Someone doesn't really deserve it?

When we realize how God has loved us—not because we loved him, not because we deserved it, not because it was easy or cheap, but solely by his grace and mercy—we realize that, when we *experience* that, we begin to run out of excuses for being slow or sloppy or stingy in our love for others.

Because God has dealt generously with me, I can be generous to others. Because God has shown kindness to me, I can show kindness to others. Because God loved me in my betrayal to him, I can love my brother or sister who has betrayed me. Because God loved me in my indifference to him, I can love a brother or sister who has shown indifference to me. Because God loved me in my selfishness, I can love a friend who is selfish. Because God loved me at great cost to himself, I can love others at great cost to myself. Not only do I have the model of Jesus, I have the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit to love even when it's costly.

It might cost me my pride. It might cost me my reputation. It might cost me money, or time, or emotional energy. It *will* cost me any claim I have to retribution. Getting even with those who offend me. But all of this I can freely let go of, because in this way Jesus has loved me. Because

in Jesus I already have everything I need. And because Jesus himself has already borne whatever offense I have received, whatever retribution they deserve—*whatever retribution I deserve*—when he gave his life willingly as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

That doesn't mean love is easy. That doesn't make the sin others have committed against us any less sinful. Some of us have been deeply hurt by others, even other Christians. That's not okay. Love is not pretending things aren't as bad as they are, or putting a good face on it, and moving on. The love of God does not make sin less sinful; it shows us that *grace is greater than sin*. It's the only thing that allows us to be honest about offenses, and yet hopeful for our relationships. It's the only thing that enables us to love one another even when we don't feel like it, even when the other person doesn't deserve it.

If you really want to know why Christmas is about love, look at Jesus, the incarnation of love. If you really want to know what love is, look at Jesus, who gives us life at great cost to self. If you really want to love others well at Christmas, look at Jesus, and don't just imitate his love, but first, *understand his love for you*. Trust his love for you. Rest in his love for you. Turn away from sin and believe in him, and know the life he offers by his grace, and great cost to self. And *then* follow his pattern of love. Love, not just when it's easy, not just when it's convenient, not just when it's rewarding, but love as you have been loved. That's the kind of love that turns the world upside down, or rather, sets it right-side-up, back into orbit—the way we dream of at Christmas, the way we long for in the Lord's return, the way it was meant to be.