

Love at Christmas

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[0 : 00] Christmas can be a pretty fraught time, with families treading on each other's toes, or trying to keep tensions hidden below the surface, or perhaps not having that family that they're able to go to.

You know, if your family situation is very difficult, does that mean that love at Christmas is just not for you? Or maybe it's romantic love.

That's usually the subject of the songs and the films, isn't it? Although, statistically, the two weeks leading up to Christmas are the most common times for relationship breakups, that often love struggles at Christmas to hold up under the weight of what we're told that our relationship should look like.

And so if you don't feel like we're living in a Hugh Grant film, or whatever the modern equivalent of that is, does that mean that love is not for us at Christmas? Really, what is that real link between love and Christmas?

Is it fair to bunch those things together? Is there any link at all? Well, the Bible says that there is. The Bible says we are right to think about love at Christmas. But it says that love at Christmas is all about, it's far bigger than anything that you will read in a magazine, or see on a card, or watch in a film, because it is a love from God himself.

[1 : 22] It is a love that makes it possible, then, for us to love one another. That opening verse, have a look there, verse 7 of our reading this morning.

Beloved, let us love one another. Beloved, literally, those who are loved, let us love one another.

But the Bible speaks about a love that we receive, and a love that we are able to show. A love, as we'll see, made possible because of Christmas, and yet which doesn't kind of finish when the decorations are all packed away.

If you want a lasting love, to love and be loved, the Bible says that this is how to find it. And so that's what we're going to look at. We're going to see the source of love, the demonstration of love, and the call to love.

Let's get stuck into these verses together. We'll get to Christmas soon. I know everyone's desperate to talk as much about Christmas as possible. We will get there. But first, we're going to see the source of love.

[2 : 20] Let me read again verses 7 and 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. So what is the source of love? Love, where does genuine love find its beginning?

Well, it's really clear there in verse 7, isn't it? Love is from God. You imagine a stream or a river. It comes from a lake or from a spring. It has a source.

Without that source, the river is impossible. It's just a ditch. You know, that water has to come from somewhere. Well, the same with love. Where does love come from? Is it something that we just kind of muster up within ourselves?

Is it something we're innately born with? Is it something that just magically appears if we play the right kind of music or light some candles? Well, the Bible says, no, love has a source.

[3 : 21] Love comes from God. Without God, without that source, then true love is impossible. Just like that river, without a source, it just dries up. God is the source of love.

How is God the source of love? Well, again, we see here, incredible what John says. It's not because God is loving. It's because, end of verse 8, God is love.

Full stop. God is the source of love because he is love himself. Perhaps that's a verse, you know, that you've heard before. God is love.

It's a well-known verse. But let's just stop and think about how mind-blowing that is. Love is not just something that God does. Love is not just a way that God acts.

But love is part of who he is. It's part of his DNA, if we could say it that way. Love is part of that essential character of God. And that means that whatever God does, he does it as a God who is love.

[4 : 24] It's not just something that he chooses. It's not just something he puts on. It's something that he is. Imagine someone describes someone else to you. They might say that, you know, she's a teacher.

Well, you might meet that person maybe in the summer holidays or in an evening, or they might have a career change. And you could say, oh, hang on, I thought that person was a teacher, and now they're not. And they might well answer, well, I'm not at the moment, or I'm not anymore, I'm not doing that now.

That something can change. And yet if you describe the person as something that they are, that person is tall, then whatever they do, whenever you meet them, that person is going to be tall.

The people are going to be who they are. That doesn't change. God is love is the point. It's not something that he puts on or that he used to be or that he sometimes does.

It's who he is. And that's incredible encouragement for us this morning. That means that we'll never find him not being loving toward us. We'll never find him, whatever he is doing, however difficult those things might be, we'll never find him not acting in love toward us.

[5 : 34] It helps us to know God and to have real confidence in him that God is love. Love is an essential part of who he is and always will be.

And now that doesn't mean that that is all that God is. We're also told in the Bible that God is holy, that God is just, that God is a consuming fire, that God is light. We need to be careful.

We don't just take this one sentence, these three words, God is love, and don't kind of pull them out of the Bible and hold it all by itself as if that's all there is to say about God. But we do want to keep hold of those and remember that in every aspect of God's character and his actions, his love is present because that is who he is.

I don't know this morning as we gather at church what your thoughts about God are. Perhaps you find it hard to think that God could love you and act in a loving way toward you.

Or perhaps you think of things that you've been through or others have been through and you say, well, actually, how could a loving God allow that? How loving is God?

[6 : 39] The Bible doesn't give simple answers to all these things, but it does state that God is love. All that God does is loving because that is an essential part of who he is.

And we'll see just a moment how he demonstrates that so clearly so we can have real confidence in it. But as we think about this big idea of love, we see that actually it doesn't begin with ourselves.

We might like to think we're loving people, but actually if we're honest with ourselves, doesn't our love kind of come and go, blow hot and cold? The Bible tells us that love begins with God.

If we want to be able to love others well, we need to have God in that equation because God is love. God is the source of love. One more thing that it means, if God is love, just to link us into what comes next.

If God is love also, it means this. It means that love has this objective standard to it. It means that love isn't just a feeling. Love is not just a word we can fill with whatever meaning we like, like a kind of an empty bucket that we can put whatever we want in it.

[7 : 46] You know, you'll see quite a lot of places that phrase, love is love. You know, the idea that love can be whatever you want it to be. If you say that it's love, then it is love.

It's interesting, isn't it? That's not actually how society works. There are plenty of things that some people would claim as love, where other people are rightly horrified by that.

Actually, our society doesn't just simply believe love is love. You can just claim love is whatever you like. And yet, where do we get that standard from?

Well, as we've seen, the Bible says God is love. God is where love comes from. God is what love is shaped like, we might say. But actually, that word and that incredibly important thing of love already has a meaning.

Just like God, it can't be whatever we'd like it to be. We can't make up love to be whatever we want it to be. If we want to know love, we have to know God. Because God is love.

[8 : 49] God is the source of love. And really, that leads us on then to what we see next in this passage. We've just said that love is not some kind of nebulous, undefined thing.

It's not like Plato. We can just shape it into whatever we want. No, God is love. Love, the eternal, unchanging creator God, is the definition of love for us.

So if God defines love, I suppose the next question is, well, what is that definition? And that's what we see in the next couple of verses here, verses 9 and 10, the demonstration of love.

Let me read those verses, verses 9 and 10. 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.

And 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. This is how God showed his love.

[9 : 51] This is how we know what true love, this love that can only come from God, looks like. He showed that to us. He demonstrated it for us.

How? Well, John says, by sending his only son into the world. So this is where Christmas enters the equation, isn't it?

Christmas is all about love because Jesus being born into our world, God sending his only son, is the demonstration, the definition of his love for us.

And yet, actually, it's not just Christmas by itself, is it? The Bible never lets us separate Christmas and Easter. It never separates the coming of Jesus with the reason for his coming.

Why did God send his son? Why is that such a loving thing? Why Christmas? Well, verse 10, he sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[10 : 52] The idea behind that word propitiation, that's kind of a technical word, it's a very specific word. It means to take God's righteous anger at sin. The point is this, that when we look around and see all that is wrong with the world, when we look around at injustice and suffering, the kind of thing that a bit of tinsel and some Christmas celebrations are not just going to get rid of, when we look around at the problems in our world and it makes us angry, well, God is far more angry at that sin than we are.

God is not going to cold and indifferent to the problems caused in his world by the wrongful actions of sinful people. God won't just turn a blind eye to all that's wrong with the world, and yet our problem is that that sin, in part, is in all of us.

That actually so often we are part of the problem, that actually we deserve God's anger. We are not as bad as we could be. We're very nice people. We're able to do very good things, and yet we know we're not perfect.

And really, here's kind of the crux. If we don't want God to ignore the injustice and the sin over there, if we want God to deal with that, well, how can we expect him to ignore it within us?

In just the same way, that sin needs to be dealt with, for God to be righteous and fair and for there to be hope of a better world. And that is where we move from Christmas to Easter.

[12 : 27] It's at the cross that Jesus dies in our place. That is where the punishment for sin is taken. That's where God's anger at sin is poured out, and yet it's poured out not on those who deserve it, like me and you, but it is poured out on Jesus as he gives up his life.

It is poured out on Jesus who he sent for that very reason, to be the propitiation for our sins. God sending Jesus at Christmas shows us his love only if we remember Easter as well.

Only if we remember that Jesus didn't just come on a holiday or a sightseeing tour here on earth. He came to suffer and die. He came to take the wrath of God upon himself.

Nothing that could be more terrifying, and yet he came to do that for us. That is the magnitude of God's love for us. He didn't say, Jesus, go to earth, show them what they're supposed to live like, go and set them a good example.

No, God's love is seen, is made manifest, John says, is demonstrated in that he loved us and sent his son to die for our sins. Why would he do that?

[13 : 43] Well, it was because of God's love for us. Now, this is really, really important. Jesus did not come to make God love us. Jesus came because God loved us.

The ultimate demonstration of that incredibly costly love. Now, what else do we see here in this demonstration of God's love?

Well, not just that he took the cost, but we see as well that also he took the initiative. Verse 10, And in this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his son.

God's love for us was shown at that greatest possible cost, but it was done at his initiative. That love began with God. Again, he is the source, as we've been saying. The point is, it's not that we are so lovely and have tried so hard that God thought, well, I suppose they've earned it.

You know, it's the least I could do. This is something that they deserve. It's not that we loved God, and in response he showed us his love. It's that he first loved us, that he reached out to us, that he did what was needed for us while we were still far away from him.

[14 : 56] Christmas was God's idea. It was God's plan and not ours. Christmas is all about this God-initiated demonstration of love.

A demonstration we'll only understand in its full depth if we trace that thread and follow that story that runs right through to Easter and the cross, where the one and only God, one and only Son, whom God sent, dies as that propitiation, that atoning sacrifice, that substitute for us, and that love from God, demonstrated, made manifest in Jesus, is what makes it possible for him, for us to know him and to love him.

It's that demonstration of a lasting and an eternal love from God that will never let us down. So the source of love, the demonstration of love, and now finally having seen these great truths, having laid them out for us, John returns really to where he began, and we see the call to love.

Verse 11 and 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. And so John, having shown us what love really is, now makes that incredible call for us to love one another.

[16 : 27] If this is the true love that God has shown us, then this, John says, is the love that we are to show to others as well. And it's not just a command, although it is, but God's love for us is also the motivation for us to love others, and it's also the means by which we're able to do that.

If we've received God's love, if we've been born of the one who is love, as John says, then we share in that same DNA, we might say, as God so loved us, that we ought to love one another as a way of showing that family likeness, the likeness of our heavenly Father, who is love himself.

And so what does this mean? In kind of practical ways, I suppose, it means loving modeled on God's love. That God has shown us what true love is like, he's demonstrated that.

It means that loving other people is costly. It means that loving other people is not always convenient. It means that loving other people involves a price.

And that is really distinct from the version of love that we so often hear about, that says, you know, when things stop working for you, or if something's not fulfilling for you, then you get rid of it. The reality of the church's love is that it's not based on how it makes us feel, but it's based on the pattern of God's love, God who gave everything for us.

[17 : 54] To love with the love that God has first shown us also means to take the initiative in showing that love toward people. You know, again, the attitude of the world is, you know, do they deserve my love?

Have they earned my love? What was the last thing they did or said for me? You know, perhaps if they fulfilled this criteria, well, then I could respond in love to them.

And yet God's love means making the first move, loving people who are unlovable, loving people who don't deserve it, loving people who may or may not respond in the way that we'd like.

If God so loved us, if he made that move, and he did, that is then how we're to love one another. And so I suppose to kind of flesh this out, if we want to demonstrate Christmas love this year, if we think Christmas is a loving time of year, and we want to be part of that, the reality is that we need to try and take our minds away from the kind of the films, and the grand romantic gestures, and the kind of the fuzzy focus pictures, and instead think, well, who are the people I can reach out to in this Advent season?

Who are the people I can reconnect with? And perhaps they don't deserve it. Perhaps it's them who has kind of left the conversation, as it were. And yet God's love is one that pursued us.

[19 : 18] And so we model that love as we pursue others. That's not always convenient. That's not always comfortable. But again, the only reason that we're here is because God showed us that love that was in no way convenient, and no way comfortable.

But he was willing to bear that cost. And that is inside the church, as well as outside. It's great to remember that this letter, 1 John, like pretty much all of the New Testament letters, is written kind of first and foremost to the church.

God, sorry, John is saying here, this is the kind of love we need to be showing to one another, to keep a church together. That if we think we're going to come into church, or a church community, and it will all be kind of sunshine and light, and no one will ever let us down, then actually we'll be disappointed.

Because we're all sinful humans here. But like John says, we have this call to love others, to love one another sacrificially. And again, that love from us comes as we look to God, the source of love, as we see that demonstration of love for us, given to us in Jesus.

If this sounds kind of challenging, to love this way, well, it's good to remember that it is challenging, but it's also good to remember that this isn't a kind of love that we manufacture, or build up within ourselves, but it's a love we receive, when we look to the love that we have first been shown in the gospel.

[20 : 46] And then we live out in response to that. And finally, incredibly, John says, it's when we do that, that will be an impact on the world around us.

That's how these verses here finish. Verse 12, No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

We can't see God, John says, that's a fact, isn't it? We want to share God's love with people, but we can't say, look, there he is. We want to share the good news of the gospel with people, but we can't physically point to Jesus.

We can't see God, and often we think, well, it would be much easier if people could just see God, if they could meet him face to face. And so how are people going to see? Well, John is saying that when this love is active within the church, and when from this love, there is a kind of a flowing out of it from the church, that God abides in us, and that's when, and that is where God is seen.

He is seen in his people, as his love is shown by his people. If you're here this morning, and you're not a Christian, or you're just visiting, you're so welcome with us.

[21 : 59] We hope that you do feel loved, in a kind of, you know, an appropriate Scottish kind of way. I do hope you feel loved. I hope as well, you see people who love one another, and who are willing to show that love in costly, and in proactive ways.

That's not because this is a room full of nice people. It's because this is a room full of naturally selfish, and self-centered people, we all are, but who are being transformed, but gradually, by the incredible love that God has first shown us.

None of us are the finished article, far from it. The picture of God, which is seen in all love for one another, as an incredibly pale shadow of the true love of God, that is seen in Jesus, that he has demonstrated for us.

And yet it is because of that love, the love that is part of God's very nature, it comes from him. That love most clearly seen in Jesus, is that love, which means we should, and can love one another.

And that as we do that, something of God, something of the source of that love, is seen by the world around us. There's lots of talk of love at Christmas, loving songs, loving films, love on cards.

[23 : 16] You might love that kind of thing, you might really dislike that kind of thing, and yet it's there, isn't it? Well, the Bible wants to tell us this morning that Christmas is all about love, but actually a far better love.

It's about God's love, the one who loved us first, he sent his son, so we could know love, and we could show love to those around us.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.