

INTRODUCTION

- What would Christmas be without Christmas music?
- Let's do a little participation exercise.
- I will read a phrase from a Christmas song, and you TRY to guess the song.
- We're snuggled up together like two birds of a feather would be. ("Sleigh Ride")
- When we finally kiss goodnight, how I'll hate going out in the storm. But if you really hold me tight, all the way home I'll be warm. ("Let It Snow")
- Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree won't be the same, dear if you're not here with me. ("Blue Christmas")
- Please have snow and mistletoe and presents under the tree. ("I'll Be Home for Christmas")
- Mistletoe hung where you can see every couple tries to stop. ("Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree")
- In the meadow, we can build a snowman and pretend that he is Parson Brown. He'll say are you married, we'll say no man. But you can do the job when you're in town. ("Winter Wonderland")
- Let's try one more, and I will give you a hint, the song title is the same as the lyrics.
- All I want for Christmas is you. ("All I Want for Christmas Is You")
- Do you notice a theme here?
- What holiday is the glory hog when it comes to love, who gets the glory?

- Valentine's Day may get all the glory for being the holiday of love, but it's pretty clear that Christmas holds a corner on the market as the season of love and romance.

- In the "2014 American Wedding Study" conducted by Brides magazine, researchers found that 19 percent of all engagements occur in December, making it the most popular month to get engaged.

- And can you guess what day is the most popular to pop the question? Statistics show that Christmas Eve is the most popular day for engagements.

- Sorry, Cupid, more people get engaged on Christmas Eve than on Valentine's Day.

- Data released by Facebook last year showed that Christmas Eve is the most popular day to get engaged, followed by Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and then Valentine's Day.

- Depending on where you find yourself concerning romantic relationships at the moment, all this love in the air can bring happiness and expectation or loneliness and isolation.

- Either way, too much focus on cuddling in the cold and meeting under the mistletoe can blind us to the real love story of Christmas.

- The challenge for us all not to miss the true story of love this season. This is the love story that has been written for all of us.

The story of true, faithful, eternal, sacrificial love. God's love in sending Jesus is the one love that changes everything.

- There is nothing wrong with celebrating love during this time of the year, because, at the root of this season, we find the theme of love.

- God did what He did because He loves humanity.

- Love has been the story of God from the beginning.
- When God created Adam and Eve, He loved them, when they sinned, God still loved them, and He provided a way for us to be saved from the ravages of sin.
- God showed His love by saving Noah and his family from the flood and giving them a new start.
- In the Old Testament God gave the commandments and law in love as a way for His people to atone for their sin and stay connected to Him.
- His love turned the world inside out when He sent His Son to live among us—the God of the universe to be born in a stable, die on the cross, and rise again from the grave.

It took love to disrupt and overturn the power of death and evil.

- The story is not about a feeling though.
- It's God's story of love in action—how the God of the universe loves you so much that He left everything to be with you, to sacrifice His life that you could be with Him.
- This love is the fourth gift of Christmas that we'll unwrap this Advent season on our way to Bethlehem.
- Over the last several weeks we have lit the candles of hope, peace, and joy on the Advent wreath. We talked about hope past, present, and future as we looked at a few prophecies about Jesus's coming, were challenged to place our hope in Him amid the trials of life and were reminded of the hope still to be fulfilled when He comes again.

We recognize that true peace only comes through Jesus Christ. We can have inner peace because he now lives in us, we can have peace with God because we have been reconciled to Him through Christ and we can have peace with others because we are all part of the same body.

We can have joy..

- Today we light the candle of love. Advent is a season for rediscovering the coming of our Savior—and for gaining an even greater understanding of how wide and long and high and deep His love is for us. This is the gift we unwrap today.
- Let's look at our passage for today, it is a very well-known passage..in fact, it is the most widely known scripture outside Matthew 7:1 among even non-believers
- John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

SERMON

I. Accept His love.

- The passage, John 3:16, is so familiar to many of us, we can quote it from some version of the Bible we are used to reading, but yet, we can look past it.
- The passage is so ingrained into our memory that we can recite it without thinking about the implications of the verse.
- This verse encapsulates 1) how God feels about mankind, 2) how He sees mankind, and 3) how He deals with humanity.
- This verse reminds of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us, a sacrifice that allows sinful people to be cleansed of their sins and allowed to stand in the presence of the Holy ALMIGHTY GOD HIMSELF!
- The message of this verse is the core of what we believe.

- It makes sense that as we unwrap the gift of love today, we should start here at the center: God loved the world.

He gave His Son. When we accept that gift and believe in Him, we are given His life—salvation and eternal life.

- For the people of Jesus day, this concept was a struggle also.
- The statement that God loves the world is surprising on two counts (3:16). First, Judaism rarely (or never) spoke of God’s loving the world outside of Israel.
- God desires to reach this world through Israel, his child. It is a uniquely Christian idea to say that God’s love extends beyond the limits of race and nation.
- Second, John tells his readers elsewhere that they are not to love the world (1 John 2:15–17) *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”*

because it is a place of disbelief and hostility (cf. John 15:18–19; 16:8). (NIVAC)

- Now here is something that is basic, we read how much God loves us, how much He sacrificed for us, how much we mean to Him, yet one thing we struggle with is the concept of ACCEPTING HIS LOVE!
- This concept is BASIC, but not EASY.
- I am sure there are some here this morning that STRUGGLE with accepting God’s love.

- I can relate because I have been one of them who struggled with accepting God's love.
- This step of accepting the gift of God's love and believing in Jesus may be challenging.

It may be something you've struggled with for a long time, it may be a brand-new idea for you, or it may be a gift you've neglected for a while.

- Maybe you feel unlovable. Perhaps you've been burned by human love too many times to trust that there's something more significant.
- Maybe you think, "You don't know what I've done."
- You don't know the dark secrets and doubts and fears and pain inside.
- Maybe I don't, but God does—and the love He offers sees and knows and understands. The love that God offers is through Jesus Christ.
- No matter what challenges or hurts you hold, God's love can handle them and heal them. Wherever you are on your journey is okay. God knows. He understands. And His response is His open arms of perfect love.
- We tend to want to punish ourselves with guilt over the past, we feel like we have to, or that we deserve to suffer.
- Romans 8:1 reminds us that there is **NO CONDEMNATION FOR THOSE IN CHRIST JESUS!**
- God is not looking for you to be shackled to the pains, hurts, and mistakes of the past, He wants you to be **FREE** from the burden of the past!
- **STOP PUNISHING YOURSELF, STOP CONDEMNING YOURSELF.**

- Quit thinking that God cannot love you for whatever reason, and KNOW He loves you.
- King David was said by God to be a man after His heart in 1 Samuel 13:14. When God said this, He KNEW what David would do with his life.
- Wherever you are, I encourage you to accept the gift of God's love. Let this season of Advent be one of accepting the love and salvation God offers in His Son.

II. Experience His love.

- If someone asked you to define love, how would you do it? What words would you use?
- For me about the only way to explain the concept of love is to experience it.
- During this season of Advent, may we all also experience the love of God intensely. It's easy to be distracted by all the things that need to get done in the next few weeks.
- It's easy to read the headlines and wonder if love really can overcome the darkness and hatred in our world.
- It's easy to allow worry over tomorrow—or next week or next year—to overwhelm us and keep us from feeling loved.
- The worries and stresses of life are real, the pressure that we feel is real, the sin that has its claws dug deep into the world is real.
- God does not ask you to ignore the reality of the world we live in to experience His love.
- You don't have to purge or rid yourself of hurry or worry.

- He invites you to bring them to Him, to surrender the deepest hurts and concerns of your life to Him and allow Him to fill you and renew you with His love.
- The good news is that the love He gives through His Son Jesus Christ is enough.
- Talking about love is one thing, to experience it is a whole new level. We need to embrace something that the Apostle Paul, a man who once led the persecution of the church wrote.
- Romans 8:38–39 (NIV) — *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
- This love is powerful, it is a love that overcomes all things. It is a love that we must allow ourselves to accept, but we **MUST** allow ourselves to **EXPERIENCE IT!**
- For example, think of a kid on Christmas day, when they get a gift, we do not want them to accept and unwrap and then put on a shelf.
- We want that gift to be like a new favorite stuffed animal to embrace and carry and hold and love till its ears wear off—or a complete set of clothes to put on and live in.
- These examples don't begin to do God's love justice, but I hope you get the idea. God's love is our lifeblood and the oxygen coursing through us to continually fill us with life.
- Don't accept God's love and then put it on a shelf, **EXPERIENCE IT!** Allow yourself the freedom to do so!

- Let this season be one of embracing God's love fully and experiencing His love in new and profound ways as we continually open our hearts and hands and minds and lives to Him.

III. Share His Love.

- What do we call a person who has great gifts, but they keep them to themselves? Selfish!
- What would we call a Christian who possesses the GREAT gift of God's love, and will not share it? THE SAME, SELFISH!
- Have you ever been in love? If so, there's a good chance you've done something loud or crazy to proclaim your love to the world. Right?
- Maybe you literally shouted it out loud in public.
- Indeed, nowadays you proclaimed it on Facebook or your social media platform of choice.
- Did anyone propose to your wife on a Jumbotron screen? It's what we humans do.
- It's why we have centuries' worth of poetry and novels and plays and love songs about love. When we are in love, it shows. We can't help it. Love overflows.
- The gift of God's love is the same way—it's for sharing.
- God's love is not like a box of homemade cookies that you share, in fact, sharing this gift doesn't leave us with less; it leaves us with more. Once we accept and experience the love of God, the next natural step is to share it, to let it overflow out and around us.
- Look at what John shares with us in 1 John 4:9-11
- 1 John 4:9–11 (NIV) — *“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.”

- God’s love comes to us and flows through us. The more we embrace and experience it, the more we share it with others.
- Let us share the love of God with all we come in contact with!

CONCLUSION

- Let’s keep our focus on making this a season of love that reaches far deeper than the sappy carols or even the romantic statistics.
- Let’s revel in God’s love and be known to others by His love flowing out of us.
- May this be a season of accepting, experiencing, and sharing God's gift of love in a new or more profound way.