

The Virtues of Christmas: Love

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Our Lord and our God,
now as we hear your Word, fill us with your Spirit.
Soften our hearts that we may delight in your presence.
Sharpen our minds that we may discern your truth.
Shape our wills that we may desire your ways.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Church tradition says that when the apostle John was an old, old man, well advanced in years, he would be invited up to speak whenever he was in the presence of the gathered church.

An usher would hold his arm and steady his balance, as he slowly made his way up front. Each and every time he would say the same words...

"Children...let us love one another."

And then he would sit down. This happened week after week. The church knew what John, the apostle whom Jesus loved, would say every time. And yet they needed and wanted to be reminded of that same, simple, and central message:

Children, let us love one another.

Let's hear God's word to us from ...

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-9, 16b (NRSV)

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Virtues of Christmas: Love

Heraclitus once said that “character is destiny.”

Character is the fruit of our little decisions over time—seeds of good decisions and seeds of bad decisions we’ve sown along the field of our lives. The challenge of character is not so much doing the right thing as learning to repeat the right thing. It’s our habits that form our character.

This is easier said than done. When we try to force or manufacture fruit in our lives on our own, it more often than not tastes either unripe or mushy. Or just plain forbidden fruit.

A navel-gazing, self-absorbed life only yields a bumper crop of: bad apples, sour grapes, fruit cakes, and prickly pears.

God never promised us that life would be a bowl of cherries, but he did promise that if we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we could yield a hundred-fold harvest, by God’s grace.

The cultivation of virtue and character in our lives as Christians, is not something that we can do alone. We need Christ and we need the community.

In Christ, we the Body of Christ are a new creation. We’re given a new nature. A second nature. Christlikeness becomes second nature to us.

John tells us that the key to a fruitful life is to abide in Christ. Dwell and linger in the divine presence. Commune with God. Don’t cut yourself off from the vine—you’ll wither and dry up. Stay connected to God.

Paul says in Romans that God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The life-giving, limitless, and unrationed source of the Spirit engages us, empowers us, and enables us to blossom in our faith.

Do you remember what the first fruit of the Spirit is in Galatians? Love.

Do you remember what the Great Commandment is? Love.

Love God with every ounce of your being. Love others as you love yourself.

And the most memorized Bible verse of all time speaks of love, “For God so what ? LOVED the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The two biggest mistakes you could ever make in life are to:

Refuse to love. And to Reject love.

But the good news is that Love has come to us—wrapped in the gift of the Christ child.

Thomas Aquinas said there are two crucial things to believe as a Christian: God exists. And that we are loved in Christ Jesus.

God's love is a gift. We can't earn it and we're not entitled to it. God is our First Love—we love because God loved us first.

God's love is unconditional, unending, and it undergirds us. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's kind of love—agape love—is marked by two things:

- it's sacrificial and
- it's giving.

That's why St. Augustine could say, "Love God—and do what you wish."

Remember Paul's famous words in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians? He speaks of the holy triad of Christian virtues: faith, hope, and what? Love.

Love is the greatest of these. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Christian love's not only a gift--it's a task, a calling, a way of life.

- Love is our modus operandi
- Love is the secret ingredient to our unity.
- Love is the path to Christian maturity.
- Love is patient and tender-hearted.
- Love isn't envious, or arrogant, or disrespectful.
- It isn't pushy or inflexible.
- Love keeps no record of wrongs.
- Love doesn't revel in wrong-doing—rather it rejoices in the truth.

Immanuel, let us love one another.

Why should we love one another?

Because love is from God. God is not only the source of love, but God IS love. If God is love, and we're made in the image of the loving God, we should then be a loving people. If we don't love, we don't know God, says the Apostle John. We've got to not only believe God, but we've got to love God. Believing and loving a loving God makes us a loving people.

In other words, you can't be truly human or godly without being loving.

The supreme definition and demonstration of love is revealed to us in Christ. They will know we are Christians by our what? Our love. With Christ in us—we're empowered to not only BE who we are, but we can DO who we are. Love is a verb.

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Do you know what the shape of Christian love is? Christian love is triangular in shape. John says that there are three aspects of love that are interconnected:

- We are loved by God.
- We are to love God.
- We are to love our brothers and sisters.

So to abide or dwell in love, means that we:

- Continue to live as the objects of God's love.
- That we continue to love God.
- And we continue to love our brothers and sisters.

Whether we love God, or we love our neighbor, it is God's love that is at work in us. The source of all love is God.

The good news is that Christ frees us and empowers us to love wholeheartedly—to love God, love others, and to love ourselves with the limitless love God provides, even in the midst of our imperfection.

Amen.

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