

growing further

Christmas Is... Love

"Christmas Is..." Week 4

Rick Long

December 16-17, 2017

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."
1 Corinthians 13:13 (NIV)

Love is an attribute of God that is a definition of who He is: God is love (1John 4:8). It is the most important attribute that we are to be identified by as believers. Jesus said that love is the one characteristic of God's people that the unsaved would take special notice of (John 13:34,35). Yet many Christians do not understand what God's type of love is. Our society equates love with a feeling that you have for another person, but you do not see that in scripture. God's type of love is called "agape love" from the Greek word agape, which means to love unconditionally the way God loves us. Based on this type of love we are commanded to pray for and help those who hate us. If you wait until you feel like "loving your enemies," you will never show love to them. This type of love is a choice: I love those people because God loves those people and so I choose to act in a loving way toward them.

**OPEN YOUR GROUP WITH A PRAYER.
THIS IS ONLY A GUIDE. SELECT THE POINTS YOU WANT TO DISCUSS.**

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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." Romans 8:35-39 (NIV)

1. Based on what this passage of scripture says, once you are a believer, what could cause you to be rejected by God? Could you separate yourself from God's love, based on what this verse tells us?

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
1 John 4:11 (NIV)

2. In this passage, John tells us that we should love each other the same way God loves us. Based on the Romans 8 passage above, what would this look like? Ask your group if anyone has ever experienced being loved by someone when they did not deserve for that person to love them. How did it make them feel?

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”
John 14:15 (NIV)

“ This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.”
1 John 5:2-3 (NIV)

3. In the above passages, what is the sign that a person loves God? How is this possible – can a person be commanded to love? What do you think is the connection between loving God and obeying Him? Do you think obedience to God’s commands is what causes us to love God or does our love of God cause our obedience? Is it possible to love God and disobey Him at the same time? How do you know?

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”
John 3:18 (NIV)

“ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”
Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

4. 1 John 3 says we are to love in actions and truth. What do you think is the link between love and actions? What do you think the truth mentioned in this verse is talking about, what truth? Ephesians 4 says we are to speak the truth in love. What do you think this means? Have the members of the group give examples of what it would look like to speak the truth in love.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)

5. This passage of scripture is called the “love” passage because it defines love and its actions from God’s point of view. With this in mind, answer the following:
What does it mean for love to be patient? Give an example. What does it mean for love to not envy? Give an example. What does it mean for love to not be proud or boastful? What does it mean that love is not rude? Self-seeking? What does it mean that love keeps no record of wrongs? What does it mean that love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth? Give an example. How does verse seven above compare with the Romans 8:35-39 passage we looked at earlier?

MAKING IT PRACTICAL (OPTIONAL)

Below are some practical exercises that your group could incorporate as a means of developing love in their lives.

Level 1 Challenge: Think of someone that you know that you have not been loving toward. Write their name down and then plan in the next week to either do or say something to them that is loving.

Level 2 Challenge: Evaluate yourself and ask God to show you the areas of your life where you are not being loving to Him or to other people. Give yourself and your obedience as a Christmas gift to God.

Level 3 Challenge: As a group, agree together that you will speak the truth in love and that you will allow others to do the same within your group. Write out a set of group expectations outlining what this will look like.

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE LEADER NOTES

Suggestions for This Week's Study

- Use the Romans 8 passage to convey to your members that God's love is unconditional, which means He loves you no matter what you do and there is nothing you could do to cause Him to reject you.
- Help your members to understand that God's type of love is not based on how you feel about people, but is based on a decision you make to act in a loving way. Help them to see this by showing that making the choice to be obedient to God, no matter what He tells us to do, is a manifestation of us choosing to love Him. Although obedience can come from a person who does not love God, disobedience cannot come from a person who loves God. We need to obey and then ask God to change the "why" of what we do. Do not wait to love God before you obey, learn to love God as you obey.
- As a group show your love for other people by following up on some of the group activities you may have decided to do during one of the other lessons.

PREPARING TO LEAD YOUR GROUP

1. PRAY for insight as you begin to prepare for leading your group. Ask for God's wisdom, that the Holy Spirit will be the teacher and that you will be God's instrument to lead the group to greater understanding and a willingness to commit to becoming more like God. Prayer should be your primary source of personal preparation for leading your group.

2. PLAN where you want to take your group in the next 60-90 days. Is your group strong in some areas and weak in others? How can you challenge the members to live more balanced Christian lives? Consider God's five purposes for the church: Glorify God, Relate to Everyone, Act Like Jesus, Care for Everyone, Express God's Love and make a plan to encourage your members to growth and commitment in their weak areas.

3. PONDER YOUR PROGRESS after each session and at the end of a series. Reflect on what went well and what didn't. Re-evaluation is key to your growth as a leader. Consider whether your plan is being effective in moving the group to greater understanding and commitment.

USING THIS SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Going Further is a tool to aid you in meeting the needs of your group. We've designed it so it can be completed easily within 30-45 minutes. As the discussion leader, you should preview and evaluate the questions based on the needs of your group. Decide in advance what is more important to focus on, should time not allow for the entire lesson.

2. Feel free to adapt the format to meet the needs of your group.

3. Personal applications are essential for growth and should be included in every discussion. When discussing how they will apply principles, group members may state very general goals, such as “I need to spend more time in prayer.” It is important for you to help people make goals that are very specific and commit to specific plans of action by asking, for example, “How are you going to begin?” An example is to get up 25 minutes earlier each morning, spending 15 minutes reading the Bible and 10 minutes in prayer. Encourage each group member to be accountable to the group for personal progress at the next meeting.

4. Your goal as the leader is to bring the group into a stimulating discussion that helps the members recognize their need for personal life change. Ultimately you want them to be willing to commit to change.