

Messiah's -Message: Perfecting Love
Romans 8:28-30

It is fitting that on the final, fourth Sunday of Advent, we should turn our attention to the theme of "love."

The entire Bible is a love story. It is the story of God's love for His glory. The Bible is the story of the lengths to which He lovingly and willingly goes to share His joy in His glory with those He loves. It is the story of creating love, revealing love, requiring love, redeeming love, restoring love, refreshing love, and returning love. The Bible is the story of God, who is love, revealing the infinite worth of His love to those who reject His love in order to draw them once again into the depth of His love.

The Bible is the story of unconditional love touched by holy conditions. It is the story of infinite love offered in finite expressions. It is the story of eternal love captured in time, the story of unbroken love marred by separation, the story of heavenly love wrapped in earth-bound sorrow. Whether the story is one of delight or desolation, the God who is love is ever present, revealing His heart, His nature, His character, His attributes, and every one: justice, righteousness, holiness, sovereignty, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, mercy, patience, wisdom, every perfection perfectly painted in the undeniable hues of perfect love.

Because God is the subject of love and the object of love, the essence and substance of love, the topic is infinite, inexhaustible; we can never say too much about God and love, for we will never, to the farthest reaches of eternity and infinity find the end and the boundaries of God's love and its implications for who God loves and how God loves.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, I cannot, and I should not, attempt to say all that can and must be said about God's love, even though I can say everything there is to say about God's love in one word: Jesus. I want to take only one small aspect of God's love and focus on one small question. In this season of our lives, in this moment in the history of the world, **how can we– we who are loved by Love, chosen by Love, called by Love, and saved by Love–how can we fulfill the commandment of love?**

That's the question in front of us. Jesus said,

"A new commandment give I unto you, that you should love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Love commands love. The question is, how do we do it? How do we love the way Love Incarnate loves?

There are myriad passages throughout the Bible, especially in the New Testament that can equip us through the Spirit to answer this question. Let me direct our attention to the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter eight, verses 28-30, particularly verse 30.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

As Paul provides brief insight into the work and will of God regarding salvation, as he shares with us how God brings a rebellious sinner back into fellowship with Himself, as he tells us of the saving work of God motivated by love for the Son and love for the sinner, **Paul also provides an outline for how someone rescued by love can fulfill the call of love to love with the love with which love loves.**

We want to look at each act of love in this sentence individually, but first let me say something about the whole sentence, the whole thought here. The idea is that God independently, uniquely, sovereignly, willingly, and perfectly does everything necessary to save us from our sins and from the judgment our sins deserve. It is God who knows, chooses, invites, corrects, and perfects those who come to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. This is love that works, love that acts, love that saves, love that succeeds.

Theological debates will rage until the kingdom comes over the order and the timing of these activities. Discussions around the role of divine and human will in accomplishing the task of salvation will persist until Jesus comes. An attempt to address and work out those very valid questions is an exercise for another time. This morning I simply want to urge you to focus on **God's love in action as a living illustration for the love which He calls us to offer one another, His people, His church.**

A second point we need to embrace, before we take on the task of learning to love like Love loves, is that the command of Jesus to love one another was a command given to disciples for

disciples. There is a love which we are commanded to extend to the world. It is the love that sent Christ from heaven to earth. It is the love of John 3:16,

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

If you think of fishing, the love of John 3:16 is like fishing with a net. You throw a large net often and gather whatever you can. The love Christ commands of His disciples is more like fishing with a single line and a single hook. It is intentional, studied, and directed. The love we are talking about today, the love that God demonstrates in salvation is intentional, studied, and directed. The point of this love is to put the love of the Father for the Son, and the love of the Father and Son for the Spirit, to put that love on display as a love worthy to experience for ourselves.

With that idea in mind, **let us consider how we may love one another after the fashion of God so that we may both experience and exemplify God's love.**

Here's what we know from Paul as to how God's love works:

- God foreknew
- God predestined
- God called
- God justified
- God glorified.

GOD FOREKNEW

God knew in advance. What did he know? At the very least we must say that **God knew His own mind and heart regarding Himself and His relation to creation.** Along with what he knew in advance, God committed himself to love, not just to be love, but to do love. God set love as His strategy and intent. God set love as the experience He would accomplish in the world He created.

If we would love the way Christ loves in this Christmas season and throughout the year, **we must determine that love will be our goal in every relationship with our brothers and sisters.** We have to foreknow that as we enter events in time, love will be the boundary, love will be the course we take, and love will be the outcome we work for. We must determine in advance that anything less than love is a settlement we will not make for ourselves and for others.

GOD PREDESTINED

That God predestined something means that God made a choice. In this instance God makes a choice regarding those who will be saved, or who will experience His love through saving grace. God has chosen our brothers and sisters in Christ for salvation. Church, in this hour, **to fulfill Christ's command to love, we must choose them as well.**

James, the brother of Jesus, leader of the early church in Jerusalem, and author of the New Testament book by the same name gives us some directions along this line. He writes,

James 2:1-13 (ESV) *1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

In the 27 years I have been the pastor at Cornerstone there have been three heartbreaking occasions when we have failed miserably at this expression of love. Three times when a more mature believer has approached me about someone less educationally or economically advanced as they were and said, "Pastor, we just can't let someone like this represent Cornerstone. What if people begin to think we are all like that?" There are three tragedies in these occasions. There is the tragedy of lovelessness among a people touched and committed to love. There is the tragedy

of lostness, as we lost from our influence all three of the people who were rejected. And there is the tragedy of blindness, for not a single person in this fellowship ever came to me and said, “You know, Pastor, those folks are new to the faith and pretty raw. I’m wondering if it would be okay if I came alongside them and helped them, you know, like make disciples out of them.”

If we would love the way Jesus loves in this Advent season, we must get better at choosing those whom God chooses.

GOD CALLS

It is one thing to know one’s own heart and make one’s own choices. It is another to invite someone into your heart and choices. This is what God does. He does not sit idly by and hope that some miracle will happen in the heart of a man, some miracle that will cause him to suddenly give up sin and selfishness, some miracle that will lead them to agree to crucify all his own desires in favor of God’s will. No, God is not idle. He knows, he chooses, he calls.

Jesus is the living, Incarnate call of God to new life and eternal life through faith in Himself. From the very start Jesus was God’s invitation to leave life on our terms and adopt life on His terms. He said to Peter and others who were fishing, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” They had made themselves fishers of fish, God invited them to a new knowledge, a new faith, a new practice, a new life, a new death, and a new hope. When Jesus said, “Come, follow me,” he knew he was calling them not merely to follow along the shore and the river and the road, but up the mountain to the cross. He was calling them to a commitment that would require their utmost devotion, even their lives.

The point is that despite the risk of danger or death, God calls. **In love He acts upon His choices because He knows that what He has to offer of Himself is inestimably more valuable than anything we can gain in this world on our own.**

If we are going to love one another as Christ loves, if we are going to fulfill the command of Christ to love, then **we are going to have to make our choice to love known to those who will receive our love, even when it is likely to cost us both something in order to gain something better.**

You may have to let someone know you forgive them. You may have to ask someone for their forgiveness. You may have to intentionally affirm someone you have ignored. You may have to correct someone’s error. You may have to simply say, “I love you,” to someone you’ve never said it to. This act of love that connects with the object of love can take a zillion different forms,

but, **if we are to love as God loves, we must make that connection, whatever the cost.** We must shoulder the burden and the opportunity of love and make it real in each others' lives.

GOD JUSTIFIES

This means that God resolves the issues that separate us from God. God justifies sinners by accepting their faith in Jesus as a sufficient response to their sin and guilt. God opens the door to justification through the sinless life and substitutionary death of Jesus. Jesus lives a perfectly faithful life, fulfilling all the Law of God. He then offers Himself to death on the cross in our place, taking upon Himself the punishment our sin deserves. When we put our faith in Christ and accept His life and death on our behalf, God accounts Christ's righteousness to us. He chooses not to hold our guilt against us. **In love, He takes it upon Himself to resolve the issues that separate us from Himself.**

How much do I need to preach now? **Love takes upon itself the responsibility to resolve the issues that separate us from itself.** God's love makes us right with God. So, if we are to love as God loves, ought we not, then, to be eager to resolve the issues that separate us from one another rather than leave them unattended to fester until their poison destroys any hope for love?

Peter writes,

1 Peter 3:8-9 (ESV) 8 Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote,

Hebrews 12:15 (ESV) See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

He concluded,

Hebrews 13:1 (ESV) Let brotherly love continue.

GOD GLORIFIES

Finally, God who knows, chooses, calls, and justifies, glorifies. It means he accomplishes in each

life he loves the goal of perfection he has set for them. We think of this in terms of the glorified, resurrection bodies we will have in eternity when Christ's kingdom is established once and for all. This is our certain hope in Christ. But looking at this through a slightly different lens helps us on our way to Christ-like love.

We will not perfect ourselves or anyone else in this life. Everyone breathe a sigh of relief. But listen, **God does not give up until the goal of love is accomplished.** That is the useful application for us. Even though we fail. Even though we falter. Even though we are slow to learn. Even though we are resistant, sinful, selfish, and stupid, God does not give up on us. Those he foreknew he predestined, those he predestined he calls, those he calls he justifies, and those he justifies he continues to work in until they day he brings them to glory. God does not give up on you or me. **Love doesn't quit.** Love doesn't resign.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (ESV) 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends.

Love doesn't give up. I know what it is like to be given up on. I know what it is like to give up on someone. **Love doesn't give up.** Love might get stretched to the limit. Love might even have to stretch out his arms and die on a cross in order to accomplish its goal for those he loves, but love doesn't quit. It doesn't give up. Love that gives up and walks away isn't God's love.

LAST WORDS

Jesus said, "Love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another." You can't love like this on your own. You can decide that today, for this Christmas season and throughout 2021, you are going to love like Jesus. But you can't do it alone.

If you are going to love others with the love of God, then the love of God must be in you, and the love of God must love through you. As big a heart as you may have to love others, your heart isn't big enough for all the love others need. But God's is.

That doesn't mean you can't love like this. It simply means you will have to rely entirely on the Spirit of God within you to express the love of God through you. Paul tells us that the Spirit of God spreads abroad in our hearts:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

And again he points out that love is a fruit of the Spirit, a product of the presence of the Spirit in our lives:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

And again to Pastor Timothy,

6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, 7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Love is more than a favorable emotional reaction to someone whom we find attractive in some way. **Love is the informed, committed, active, correcting, perfecting work of God that brings us into eternal, glorious life with Him.**

This is how God has loved us. Now, in Christ, in the Spirit, in God's love, love one another as He has loved you, and may Christ's love fill you and flow from you this Christmas and throughout the coming year.

In Jesus' name. Amen.