



Sermon – December 20, 2020  
Phillip Bethancourt

**Verses Covered This Week**

*1 John 4:7 – 10*

*Luke 1:31 - 33*

Let me invite you to open your Bibles. We're going to spend our time this morning in 1 John chapter 4. 1 John chapter 4, verse 7. Merry Christmas to you. And if you're a guest with us whether you're here in the room or you're gathering with us online, welcome home. We come to God's word every week asking that His Spirit will change us. And that's what we're doing this morning. We're coming into our last week of our Advent series and we've thought through the different dimensions of what it looks like to remember this Christmas story. Last week we talked about the joy of Christmas. How it doesn't come from good luck, but from good news. That there's good news in the gospel. And at the root of that good news is what we're going to spend our time thinking about with this morning. The love of God. And the way that that love is on display at Christmas. And so if you've got your Bible with you, follow along with me. 1 John chapter 4, verses 7 through 10. Here's what it says.

*<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>In 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.*

Well, as we know, 2020 has upended pretty much every aspect of our life including this Christmas season. And one of the ways that that showed up during the holidays is it's transformed how people can visit Santa Claus. So you know the drill. You go around to malls or other places around the world and families will bring their kids in order to have their picture with Santa. And this year, there have, I'm sure, had to be a lot of changes in order to make that happen. Maybe Santa's having to make a list and disinfect it twice in order to create the environment that families need to feel comfortable to do it. You see some of these set ups, they've got Plexiglas barriers that will keep a distance between Santa and the child. Maybe Santa's got an extra big mask that will fit around that big, bushy beard. Or maybe they're socially distanced, six feet apart, and that already long line is even longer. There are all sorts of

changes that are happening with some of the experiences that we have around Christmas. But here's what 1 John confronts us with this morning.

No matter what is changed around Christmas, nothing has changed about Christmas. Christmas is a story of God's love for us in Christ. The way that He sent His Son to take on flesh, to die the death that we deserved so that we might find salvation in Him. And what we're going to notice this morning as we turn to our text is John is emphasizing for us today the love of Christmas. If you look back at this text, what you're going to notice is that the word love is used 10 times in these four short verses. That's the recurring emphasis of John's focus in this part of his letter. And what we're going to find this morning is that John is calling us to see and to savor the love of Christmas. So let's begin by looking back at verses 7 and 8 where we follow John calling us to this idea of seeing the love of God at Christmas. John's going to give us a window into God's love that we can only see through the Christmas story. And he starts that in verse 7 beginning with an instruction. Do you see what his instruction is? He says, "Beloved, let us love one another." As Paul begins to speak about love, he uses this term, beloved, which in the original language would signify an affection, a connection, a deep relationship, he's as if he's saying, "As I command you to love one another, I want you to know that I love you." That there is this sense of connection as he begins to describe to them this call to love one another. And that idea of loving one another shows up several times in this brief passage and one of the questions we should be asking is, "Who is the one another that he has in mind?" And what we find here is he's speaking about the community of the church. The fellowship of the faithful. Those who are part of the family of God should display a unique love to one another. Now that's not to say we don't care about the world or that we don't want to love those who are outside the church. But what John is striving at is that there is a unique love that happens amongst us. And one of the ways that we best reflect God's love for us is by displaying that love to others in the church. That's why when you look at the life and ministry of Jesus when He speaks about what is the greatest commandment, He talks there about how we are to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And that's been a particularly challenging thing to do in 2020. When our world has been turned upside down by racial unrest and political turmoil and a global pandemic. It feels in those moments as if you should turn inward. That when nothing is stable around you, the best thing you can do is to focus on yourself. And yet what John is driving us to is he's calling us to see the love of God this Christmas. And to display that love of God through the way that we love one another. And that's one of the things I've loved the most about stepping into this role as your new pastor over the last few months. I have gotten to watch the love of God on display in the way that you love one another. I mean, think back all the way back to April and into May when in my first weeks here were preaching to an empty room. You're watching it online at home and trying to keep the dog and the kids at bay while you're listening to the message and trying to fix your heart on Christ during the worship. And yet what happened was I saw love showing up. I saw it in the way that some of you hand-crafted masks that you gave to family members and friends and people in our community to meet that need in the early going when you couldn't find them. I saw the way that you as a church were willing to be flexible and to split into two services for a season and then to come with new sanitation practices and expecting masks and making those adjustments so that we could continue to worship the Lord safely. I saw it in the way that you continued to faithfully give and to invest resources here so that we can continue in the work of the ministry. So when John speaks here of loving one another, he's saying to Central this morning, "Keep doing what you're doing." That when we love one another, we are reflecting the love of God for us in Christ. And the great news is,

starting next week, we get a new way to test that love for one another. Because if you remember last week I announced that starting next Sunday we're going to be gathered back together in one service. This place will be more full. And there are probably some of you that have been coming to this worship center ever since the first Sunday it opened and you've got your seat, it's right there on that row. And now that we split into two services, guess what, there maybe somebody in the other service who has fallen in love with that exact seat too. And you're both going to show up next Sunday, and maybe you just need to bring a few breakfast tacos and have a tailgate in the parking lot before we open the doors because somebody is going to end up with that seat and someone's not. And if that happens for you, let's have a heart in loving one another, of being charitable towards each other, of displaying the type of love that John is highlighting here. Because what he's showing us is that when we love one another, it gives us a window into the way that God loves us. A window that is most clearly seen during this Christmas season. So the question we should be asking ourselves, if we're commanded to love, why? What is the purpose for doing it? And you're going to see in these two verses, in 7 and 8, two reasons that John tells us for why we should love one another.

Look back at the end of verse 7. We love one another because God is the source of love. He says there, for this love is from God. He supplies it to us. He gives us what we need so that we can use it for His glory. The love that we are called to display for others is not something that we conjure up from our own passion or willpower or desire. It is an eternal love that is poured into our hearts by His Spirit so that we can carry it forward in a love for others. And so notice what it says there as we go on in verse 7. It tells us whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. He says, do you want to know how you can tell if somebody has experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who knows God in a saving way? Watch the way they live. Look at how they love. Whoever loves is from God, born of God, and knows God. He speaks there of God as both Father and Friend. That we are born of God and we know Him. So one of our staff members, Wes Wilkinson, in our college ministry, him and his wife just had their first kid this past month. They're going through all the new parent adjustments: sleepless nights, learning new rhythms, making all those things. Each family has a slightly different experience. But one thing most new parents have in common is the tendency of people when they see that baby for the first time to look at the baby and then look at the parents to try to determine who does it resemble the most. Who do they favor? Who do they look like? And when you see that child and they resemble the father, you can tell that there is a connection there, a reflection that's happening. And when John speaks here of the way that we are called to love one another, he is reminding us that God is the source of love. And that when we love one another, we are resembling our Heavenly Father. We are reflecting that reality in our lives.

But notice also as verse 8 begins, he flips this perspective and he now talks about what happens when we don't love. Look at what he says there. Anyone who does not love does not know God. In other words, a stranger to the love of God is a stranger to God Himself. It reveals that they don't know the Lord. And John is reminding us here of the way that God is the source of our love. But notice the second reason he gives for why we're called to love one another, to see the love of Christmas. You'll notice it there as verse 8 goes on. He says there that God is the standard of love. God is not just the source of love; He is the standard of love. He is the means by which we measure what love is. Look at how he says it there. Because God is love. We live in a culture that will tell you that love is God. That your feelings are your future. That love is love and we are called to not judge others. And we have this tendency to think that love or

tolerance or affirmation is the most important reality. And certainly we want to be loving towards others. But notice what John says. He doesn't say love is God. What does he say? God is love. He is the standard of love. So what does it mean that God is love? It means of His essence, in terms of who He is at His most inward being, the core of who God is is characterized by love. It infiltrates every aspect of who He is and what He does. It's part of what He desires to put on display through the story of Christmas. I'm reminded of the familiar quote by the theologian A. W. Tozer. You know what he said? What comes into your mind when you first think about God is the most important thing about you. So what comes in to your mind when you think about God? Do you think of God as someone who's distant? Maybe disconnected from your life. Doesn't really apply or connect to what you're going through on a day to day basis. Or maybe you think of God as harsh and strict and relentless in His expectations for you in a way that you can never live up to. Maybe you think of God instead as boring, as disinteresting, as if it's something you'll get to later on because you have too much life to live right now. Well what John is reminding us of is what we should be thinking about. When God first comes into our mind is the reality that God is love. That He is the embodiment of love. That His love is called to be on display in our lives. And that's what it looks like to see the love of God at Christmas. One of the things that Paul, that John is reminding us of here is that what God is doing in the coming of Christ is He's setting a display for the ultimate love that will be made known on the cross. And that's what we're going to notice in the second part of this passage. Because in verses 9 and 10, what we're going to see is John extends beyond the call to see the love of God at Christmas and now next he's going to talk about how we are called to savor the love of God at Christmas.

So look at how he says it there. In this is the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In 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. In other words, once we see the love of God on display in the character of Christmas, it helps us to make sense of the love of God on display in the coming of Christmas. That when God sends His Son, He is sending forth His love in a way that He calls us not just to see but to savor. And as we look at this, John is going to lay out for us two reasons why we should savor the love of God at Christmas. And you'll notice the first one there in verse 9. We can savor the love of God at Christmas because it gives us life. Notice how he talks there at the beginning of verse 9. He speaks about how Christmas is a revelation of God's love. Do you see what he says? In this love of God was made manifest among us. That idea of making manifest is to reveal what was previously hidden; to disclose, to make known. It's what right now is probably happening out on television when the college football playoff people are telling us who's in and who's out on the college football playoffs. If you know, don't shout it out right now because I haven't found out yet. There's this sense of, we don't know and yet it's made known. What is unclear is now made clear. It is revealed. And what John is speaking of here is that the coming of Christmas is the beginning of the public revelation of God's love for us in Christ. It's the love that was promised from long ago, but now the promise of that love has made its way amongst us. And that's what he says there. How does God manifest His love at Christmas? Look at the middle of verse 9. He says that God send His only Son into the world. So right now, all across America, there are millions of packages that are going out to houses around the country. With COVID happening, there are less and less of us that want to shop in a store. So more and more of us are buying online. And as a result of that there's a surge of Christmas gifts that are being sent around the country bigger than any time in history. And as a result of that, there's been delays.

There's been problems. Chances are, if you haven't yet placed your Christmas order, there's a strong likelihood it's not going to get there in time. But each time that that purchase is clicked and each time that that gift is put in a package and each time it's sent out and each time it is received at the door, the same thing is happening. Someone cared so much about someone else that they sacrificed of their own in order to provide for the needs and desires of another. And when John speaks here of the nature of God sending His Son into the world, He is giving us the ultimate picture of that reality. This idea of sacrifice. This idea of love. This idea of meeting our spiritual needs is captured there in verse 9 and it's done in a way that echoes that familiar verse from John 3:16. When 1 John 4:9 says that God sent His only Son to the world, doesn't that sound a bit like John 3:16?

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If you want to know what love looks like, if you want to savor love this Christmas season, you need to see it on display in the sending of God's Son. But why did God send His Son? Notice the way that verse 9 speaks about it at the end. So that we might live through Him. He sends His Son to live so that we might live. In fact, if you look at John's letter here, this is the only time that the term live is used. He's talking about this bringing to life, taking what is dead and making it alive. There is this picture John is giving us of our spiritual death in the darkness of our sin. That we are separated from God. That we face judgement. That we are dead in our trespasses and in our sins. But what he is reminding us of is that when God sends His Son at Christmas, He is sending Him to take on life so that we might live. So that we might be set free. Our life is bound up in Christ. And that should catch our attention in a fresh way right now as COVID vaccines are going out around the world. So you've seen them being started to be taken here in America. They're going out around to countries all over the globe. And one of the headlines that's grabbed the attention is to tell stories about those who were the early recipients of the vaccines in particular countries. And in England, the person who got the most media attention after the vaccine started going out wasn't the first person to receive it, but the second person to receive it. And the reason for that is because it was a man by the name of Bill Shakespeare. And when that familiar name came up, the puns and the jokes soon followed. To vaccinate or not vaccinate; that is the question. There were all sorts of interest and focus on him and the fact that he received this. But think about what's happening at the core of this treatment. You're taking something outside yourself and what's outside you is being pierced to transform what's inside you in order to protect you from a threat that is outside you. And in a small medical way, that is giving us a glimpse into a spiritual reality that John is speaking of here. That what God does is He sends His one and only Son, that the One outside us, His truth, His gospel, His coming at Christmas, it pierces our hearts. And that which is outside us changes what is inside us in a way that protects us from those threats that are outside us: satan, sin, and death now have no standing on those of us who have trusted in Christ for salvation. And the reason for that, as John reminds us, is that because those of us who are dead had now been made alive because of what started at the story of Christmas. Christmas makes it where we might live through Christ.

But notice the second reason here that Paul, that John speaks of why we should savor the love of God at Christmas. It's because, as verse 10 tells us, it gives us peace. He says:

<sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He has loved us

There's this connection that John is making between the cradle and the cross. Through the coming of Christ and His crucifixion. That His birth always had His death in view. And he does that by beginning verse 10 by setting up this contrast. Not that we have loved God but that He has loved us. What John is doing is he's looking back into our old life. He is reminding us of the reality of our fallen condition. That in our sin we do not seek for God. We don't try to love God. We can't do that. We're incapable of it. Our sin separates us from Him. He is reminding us of the brokenness of reality. If I were to come over to some of your homes today and see the decorations in your house, we might see a Christmas tree, we might see garland and lights, there might be a variety of things. But one of the probably the most common things we find are Christmas decorations in kitchen. Maybe some dishes, some mugs, but also right next to the sink, there will be a Christmas towel. And here's one of the things I've learned in my life. The more festive a towel is, the more useless it is for actually drying your hands. You'd have more success rubbing your hands on your countertop than on this towel to actually get any liquid off it. The more merry the towel, the less moisture it removes. It has all the appearance of being good. You're like, "Wow! This is so festive. I want to take this up. I want to put it to use. This is just what I need in this moment." It has this appearance of meeting the need, but it can't meet the moment. Well, that's the same spiritual reality that John is speaking to here. When he says, not that we loved Him. He is showing us that in our sin, we are incapable of loving God. We are incapable of seeking after Him. And we might even do things that have the appearance of running for God. We might try to have our good outweigh our bad. We might try to live the way that God, we think that God tells us to live. But what we find is that our efforts for righteousness are nothing but filthy rags. We didn't love God. And what verse 10 is reminding us of is that we should savor the love of God at Christmas because even when we didn't love God, He loved us. And notice the way that it talks about how this love was on display.

Why did God send Jesus? Look back at verse 10. It tells us at the end.

And sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

He sends His Son at Christmas. The reason that God sends is because we sinned. We sin; He sends. He sends His Son, why? It tells us there. To be the propitiation for our sins. Perhaps you're looking at that word and that seems like a complex word, it's difficult to understand. Propitiation is not a term that we're used to hearing about. Well, let's understand it together. See, back in that culture, in the Roman empire, there were many gods that the people would worship. And they would go to the temples and they would offer gifts to the idols. And they would do that because they knew that if they didn't, that they might face judgement, that they might not receive blessing. And so the reason you brought your gift to this god was to appease his anger, was to satisfy his wrath, was to try to make yourself right with him, to earn your way into good standing with that deity. Now is that what John has in mind here when he speaks about propitiation? Is that the picture that he's driving at? Well, it seems like that would make a part of what he is focusing on here. But the true foundation for the concept of propitiation is not seen in the culture around John, but in the story of Scripture that came before John. When you look back in the Old Testament it speaks of the sacrificial system. That the people of God were to come to God and offer sacrifices to remove them from judgement for their sin. And so when those animals were slaughtered, when the blood was spread upon the altar, it functioned in a way

to bring about redemption, to bring about deliverance, to bring about a satisfaction of God's judgement. When John speaks here of this picture of propitiation, this promise of propitiation, that's the image he's giving us. That's the foundation he is building upon. That God sent His only Son to be a sacrifice. That's the essence of what love is. Love at its core is sacrificing what's best for you for the sake of what's best for others. And he says that Jesus does that for you and me by becoming our propitiation. He stands in our place. He takes the judgement that we deserve for our sin. He pays the penalty for us falling short of God's design for our life. And He invites us into a family, into a relationship with God. To be set free from our sin. To find salvation. To find the peace that is often missing in our lives. And when he does that, when John speaks of this truth, he is showing us that the essence of God's love is best displayed on the cross. That's why the cross is always in view when we think about this story of Christmas. And I want you to see the way that reality is true. If you've still got your Bible with you, slide back with me to Luke chapter 1. And I want you to notice here the way that Luke speaks about when the angel appears to Mary. He comes to Mary to foretell of the reality that her son will be the Messiah. And look at Luke chapter 1, verses 31 through 33. Luke's going to give us an answer to the question, how does the promise of propitiation connect to the story of Christmas? Here's what the angel says to Mary. Luke 1:31.

<sup>31</sup>And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Don't miss this. When the angel speaks to Mary, he gives her a promise that her son will be given a name. Her son will be given a throne. Her son will be given a kingdom. But what we find as the story of Christmas unfolds is that the pathway to the promise is through propitiation. That that payment for sin, that bringing low in humiliation through the death on the cross is what ultimately results in the exaltation that comes through Jesus' resurrection. And so the reality that we need to be confronted with this morning is that John is not just calling us to see the love of God at Christmas. Every carol you hear, every Christmas movie you re-watch, every nativity scene you drive by in a house in our area is picking up echoes of this love. You can see it all around you. But what John is reminding us of this Christmas is that seeing the love of God is not enough. That we are not called to just see the love of God but to savor the love of God. To take that which we see and to make it our own. To taste and to see that the Lord is good. To know in our hearts and to believe with our heads and to declare with our mouth that Jesus is Lord. That this Christmas story is for us. I can't imagine how difficult 2020's been on all these Santa Claus that are appearing around the world. Because the truth is, that was probably a hard job to begin with. I mean, think about it. You've got that outfit that's bound to be hot, uncomfortable. You've got kids climbing up on your lap all the time. You've got people whining, throwing fits. You never know what experience you might have. But as I think about it, I'm haunted by the answer to a question that a Santa Claus gave one time when he was interviewed and asked, "What is the hardest thing about being Santa?" He didn't say the long hours. He didn't say the hot conditions. He didn't say the difficult children. You know what he said was the hardest thing about being Santa Claus? He says, the hardest thing about being Santa is when a kid sits in your lap and you ask them, 'What would you like for Christmas?' and their answer is, 'I just want my mommy and daddy to get back together.'" There are these moments in this world where we're reminded of the brokenness. Where the winter of our despair feels overwhelming to

us. And sometimes that can even happen most clearly in the midst of the celebration of Christmas. And what John is reminding us of this morning is that's why we need the love of Christmas. That what God is doing in the sending of His Son is making a way so that all might be made new. And the call of the gospel to each one of us this morning is to see and savor the love of God this Christmas.

Let's pray together.

Father, I pray that in this moment that the distractions would fade. That our eyes would be fixed on You. That You would help us to see Your love of us in a fresh way, Father. Your willingness to sacrifice even your own Son to the sake of transforming our hearts. And I pray that You would do that even right now, Lord. If there are those in this room or watching online that have never savored the love of Christ in a saving way, I pray, God, that You would today. And for those of us that have, Father, we're asking now that You would continue to knit our hearts together in love so that we can put the love of Christmas on display in the way that we love one another. That we might sacrifice for the sake of Your kingdom in order to bring Your Son glory in whose name we pray. Amen.