

Love! We say we love one another. We say I love you. We say we love and care for other people. We say these things, but what I want to stress today as we talk about the final fruit of the spirit is that love as used in the Bible is not merely a word; it is an action. Let me state it stronger than that: love is either an action, or it is a lie! You see, a love that is only on one's lips and not seen in one's actions is actually merely a mind game. Real love is seen by actions done to show another that when we say we love them, we back it up in some concrete way. That is what is so powerful about the Christmas story. It is an action of love.

What we experience in the Christmas story is God not only saying, "I love the people I created and call my own." We see God back up that statement by sending His Son to the world. It is an action! God so loved the world that He sent His Son to the world. God wanted everyone to experience His love, so He sent Jesus to be with us.

Now interestingly, God not only sends His Son, but we see that God shows us He wants everyone to experience His love and this is demonstrated by what we see happening in the Christmas story. Note that when the Christmas event first happened, God invites two sets of persons to come and see. He first appeared to shepherds on a hillside in Judea, people known to be of the chosen people. But then He also sent word to a second set, the wise men, who were not of Judeo descent. God's action is clear, I love all people whom I have created.

Let me further explore the great ways God shows his love in his action with these two sets. First the shepherds. Realize that shepherds are not glamorous people at all. They are very hard working people, but more than that, they represent in some ways persons who are considered socially 'low levels.'

To think about a similar profession today, one would have to think of the midnight shift, minimum wage janitors or garbagemen who might clean up office buildings and the real grunge work of life not seen during daytime hours.

Of course, even with that image, the point is the same. God's love experienced in Jesus goes to all people regardless of social achievements or lack there-of.

A similar point can be made using the Magi or wise men. They are on the other end of the social society ladder as wealthy wise men. Jesus came to forgive sins of all people regardless of social position or nationality.

God's love is an action which will transcend outward circumstances and so should our love. When we see the fact that God loves regardless of the circumstance, we need to realize that God is calling on us to model that type of action in our lives too. For that is what love is about.

Years ago, a young woman went from Dr. Robert Shuler's church as a missionary to Mexico. Her heart was aglow for the work she would be doing. In her prayer about the trip, she sensed God say that she must really love the people where she was going. In her personal Bible study, she came across the passage of 1 Corinthians 13, you know the one read at most weddings, and often called the love chapter.

As she studied, it occurred to her that to truly be prepared for the mission work she was to do, she needed to take the word love when she found it there and interpolate the words: *love for the Mexicans*. She thus read for instance, though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love for the Mexicans, I am become as sounding brass or crashing symbols."

That was how she then attempted to do her Christian service. She recognized that this scripture was talking about love as actions. It is also meant not only for marriages, but especially it seems meant for all peoples, especially those to whom God was calling her to live and work. Her deep love of the people then enabled her to have a wonderful ministry in Mexico, because the people there saw that her action of love for them spoke volumes about the Gospel.

If love is to be part of our lives, it must permeate our everyday living. Again, consider today's text and key verse, John 3:16. That verse talks about the love God modeled.

God so loved the world that He sent His Son into our world. He did this for many reasons, but one reason this scripture is so powerful is that it reminds that Jesus came and endured all of life including some of the hardships that come with everyday living. Again, we come back to the Christmas story of His coming. God's Son came to the world, being born into a family. This was a family in all the interesting sense of the word.

This was a family that endured hardships. First we note they take trips, have to rough it where they stay. I have stayed in some bad places with one lodge in Canada coming especially to mind, but never a place as rough as a stable. Jesus was born as a helpless baby to parents who were not wealthy. He was born and entrusted to parents who knew difficult in life.

Years back when I was serving at another church, one of the woman, Debby, was coordinating the children's Christmas play. It had the usual characters, and the girl who was playing Mary was given specific instruction on her actions in the one scene. Debby was adamant that when the innkeeper told Joseph with Mary standing beside her that there was no room, Mary was to sit down absolutely exhausted.

I tell you, the message of how difficult the circumstances of that first Christmas took on new light for me. I mean the manger was a trough, and the nice little picture scene of the Christmas cards with the clean straw and the animals nicely arranged around the stable, doesn't grasp the difficulty encountered by Jesus and his family. * Understand I don't really want a Christmas card showing it that way, but I got what was meant in dealing with what really happened there.

Beyond even the outward circumstances of the birth, consider too that Jesus learned to deal with people from being in a family. I am sure that Mary and Joseph were like the rest of us who have been parents. They had their moments when they were tired, irritable, grumpy and critical. Oh I guess they didn't have to deal with the Christmas hyper-ness in kids.

But Mary and Joseph were parents nonetheless, with all the emotions parents can exhibit. And Jesus had to deal with them. I am sure from time to time, they'd be tired and cranky.

Furthermore, since Jesus lived in a family, he seemed to learn and understand that often the most difficult people to love are not the outsiders like neighbors and strangers, but nagging family members. There are a few times when the Bible shows the interaction of Jesus with his family. We can learn from them and from Jesus' reactions.

See, one of the teachings we see Jesus make in those stories is our call to love one another. Sure He loves his family, but more important, we are to reach out in love to whoever is close by us. Jesus says, the people we are involved with in our everyday relationships: these are our brothers and sisters.

Family is more than those who are our flesh and blood. Jesus shows us that it is important to love, by showing our love in everyday actions with the everyday people of our lives. This includes the people we know so well. Real love shares with others. Love happens when you say and do actions like: "You've had a hard day, I'll fix dinner tonight." "Here take mine, I don't really need it." "How about I pick you up from school today so we can go do something fun." "It may be out of my way, but I really would be glad to give you a ride. We could talk"

There are so many ways we can show love. We just need to be committed to putting action behind the words we say when we tell another we love them.

You know the biggest point I want to make this morning about love is that God modeled how we are to love by the action taken on that first Christmas. God is a God who is not content to merely say, "I love you my people." Rather He came and showed us love. He even began the process by banging out the message telling people about His love.

He sent angels to the shepherds. He sent a special star to the wise men. He sends and provides us with proof of his love also, but too often we don't seem to notice it. Nonetheless, the actions are there, for God pursues us with that same type of love and wants us to know that love in our lives. Then we can in turn reach out in love to others since we know God loves us. That is the message of Christmas. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

God's love of us will be shown by his action in our world. The Christmas story reminds us that God wants to reveal to all humanity, the love He has for us. We too, need to be committed to loving others and recognizing that to really love, it requires action, and not merely words.