



TIME OF GRACE®

Christmas Buzzwords: Love

Study Notes

Summary

How do you define the word *love*? We all agree that love is what our world needs more of, but what exactly is it? Is love tough or tender? Strong or sweet? How do we know what true love is and, more important, where to find love that lasts throughout our lives?

- **1 John 4:8-10:** ⁸ God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Points to Ponder

1. Evaluate: True love is doing what is best for another person, no matter who that person is and no matter how that person has behaved.
2. Read and ponder the words of Romans 5:8 (Pastor Mike's favorite verse in the Bible). Write down at least three insights into the love that God has for us.
3. According to 1 John 4:11, the only fitting reaction to God's love for us is for us to love one another. Who could use a little extra love from you this holiday season? What might that love look like in practice?

Time of Grace Ministry
Christmas Buzzwords: Love
1 John 4:8-11
December 26, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

The days have gotten noticeably shorter and the nights are getting noticeably colder, which we all know means it is the season for, say it with me - Hallmark Christmas movies! Can I talk to you about Hallmark Christmas movies for just a second? You know the kind. Have you seen them before? If not, let me show you a picture. Hallmark is copyrighted, but here is a couple from our church, who took like, these engagement pictures that totally looks like a Hallmark Christmas movie, in my opinion.

If you are not familiar with the plot, it is when the big city girl travels back to her small hometown for the holidays, and she physically bumps into some guy, and she looks up at his incredible hair, and one thing leads to another and there is some tension, but they come back together and everything works out. Or the other Hallmark plot, it is the big city journalist with a demanding boss, sent back to her hometown to write a story on the small-town holidays, and she runs into the schoolteacher or the innkeeper with the family business. And the spark flies and the guy - did I mention, has really great hair? And they start to fall for each other and something gets in the way, but they make it and they kiss in the end.

Or it is that girl who, after her divorce, the single mom who swears she will never open her heart again, except one day she physically bumps into a stranger and looks up, and he, of course, has really, really great hair because he is a European prince, but we do not find that out till the end of the movie. And you know, they flirt, and they make Christmas cookies together and they throw flour at each other, and something almost brings them apart, but then there is always like, the janitor, who kind of looks like Santa. And in the end, at about the what, 83-minute mark, they kiss and the credits roll, and that is a Hallmark movie.

How many people here today have ever seen a Hallmark Christmas movie? Yeah, guys, it is okay. You can raise your hand. It is not like this is on the internet or anything. How many people here today have seen at least five Hallmark Christmas movies? Wow, that is a lot of you. How many are unembarrassed to say in public company they have seen more than ten Hallmark Christmas movies? Thank you very much for your courage. So, I have personally never seen a Hallmark Christmas movie, but my daughters this year got addicted to "the Mark," as I call it. And they have their matching Hallmark Christmas movie watching t-shirts that they put on, and you would not believe what my two beautiful daughters do to my father.

Every Friday, they sleep over at my mom and dad's house, and we drop them off and they walk through the door, and they literally take the remote out of Grandpa Tom's hand, they turn off his

true crime show, switch it to a Hallmark Christmas movie, and force my poor father to watch a predictable plot line about a big city girl who falls in love with a small-town guy with really, really great hair! I mean, my dad, he did two tours in the jungles of Vietnam, and this is how he is spending every Friday night. So, you need to add Tom Novotny to your prayer list, because he really needs a lot of help.

You know, the crazy thing about Hallmark Christmas movies is that they are crazy popular. Everyone knows, even the biggest fans, they are pretty predictable and they are super cheesy, and they are really low budget and it takes about ten days to make an entire Hallmark Christmas movie. And yet, have you noticed what has happened? Skyrocketing popularity. The Hallmark Christmas movie turned into the Hallmark Christmas Week, which turned into Hallmark Christmas Month, which is like, what, two to three months, and then back again in July. Hallmark is making some serious money off of those predictable plots.

And like I said, I have never seen one before, but I am always curious to research why people love the things that they love. And so, I jumped online the other day and did some research, and looked on websites of psychologists and media analysts, trying to figure out why is it that so many people love the Hallmark Christmas movie? And here is the answer that I found - that people, deep down in their hearts, want to know that everything is going to be okay, that it is going to work out, and that nothing is going to get in the way of love.

About 3,000 years ago, there was a king in ancient Israel who wrote these words. "What a person desires is unfailing love." We want, in essence, a Hallmark life, where things work out, and everyone is safe, and love gets the last word - and that is why I am so excited that you are here today. I know that many of you have experienced, just like I have, that life is not a Hallmark movie. Some of us have amazing, loving, affirming fathers, and some of us do not. Some of us have had roller coaster relationships with our dad, and some of us were really close until he passed on. Some of us have amazing friends that we could go to with anything, and others of us have lost touch and friends came and then they went. Some of us have found love, and some of us did not. Some of us took our vows and some of us broke them. Some of us have been betrayed and deeply hurt.

Like, as much as we would love life to be a Hallmark movie, it isn't - but that is why I am so glad that you are here. Because today, I want to offer you the best Christmas gift that I could think of. It is actually something that I want to re-gift to you today. It is a gift that I got from a guy named John, who happened to be the best friend of Jesus. 2,000 years ago, there was this fisherman named John. He lived in a northern part of Israel, and one day this guy showed up named Jesus and said, "Follow Me," and John did. And he became known, as the Bible says, as the one that Jesus loved.

And when John was an old man, he wrote a letter that you can find in the Bible, called 1 John, and he talks about the Jesus that he came to know and the God of love he came to believe in. And today, I want to share with you John's words because this is the most loving section of the entire Bible. Out of all the 31,173 verses, I want to read to you today the most packed section of love, to give you exactly what your heart wants - not a video game system, not an engagement

ring, not a bigger TV, not a few days away from work. "What a person desires is unfailing love," and that is the gift that John's going to give us today.

So, check out these words from 1 John 4. "God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Ooh, that is such a good word! For the next few minutes, I want to talk to you about that. I want to put a big bow on it, and I hope in about 20 minutes you are going to love it so much that you are going to get it tattooed on your neck as a special Christmas...okay, you might not do that, but I hope you like it and take some notes, because in these words there is so much love - so much love. I cannot wait to share them.

Let us start with the place where John starts. He says, "God is love." Claiming that the King, and the Lord, and the Judge, and the God of the universe could be defined by the thing we all want in our hearts was crazy. I mean, this was crazier than, in the middle of a Hallmark Christmas movie, a zombie apocalypse coming, pouring out of the local library, and a dark ending and a twist. Like, it just did not happen, but this is what John says. "I followed Jesus, and do you want to know what I learned? I learned that God is love."

And those three words are the stunning claim that changed Pop's life. I want to show you a picture that a few of you have seen before. The beautiful bride in the middle of that picture is a young woman named Pinyaluck. To help out white guys like me, she goes by Pop. Pop grew up in Thailand, where statistics say 99.9% of people are religious. It is hard to find an atheist or an agnostic in Thailand. People believe in something beyond themselves, and Pop is no different.

But, one day she met a guy, and the guy's name, as a crazy coincidence, happened to be John. And John told Pop these three words, "God is love." And the thought thumped her right in the heart. "This is love?" "Yes," John said, "love. The God, the King, the power, the universe, the thing that is bigger than us, that something, that someone, he is love." And Pop's personal faith would never, ever be the same. I mean, can you imagine hearing that for the very first time? Some of you have grown up in a culture where, of course, God is love. But can you imagine if you just thought, you know, like people in A.A., that there is a higher power, right? It is power, and it is authority, and it is control. Can you imagine hearing for the first time that the one who is writing the script for your life - yes, he is holy, and yes, he is good, and yes, he is righteous, but more than anything, that God is love? And what would that do to you? How would that change the way that you go through life? What a person desires is unfailing love, and the God who never fails, he happens to be love.

And that is why I want to make some of you a special Christmas offer today. Whether you are sitting right here in church or watching at home - for those of you here in church, if you have that white communication card with you, if you have never heard the profound message of the love of God, if when you think about your own religion or spirituality, if the first word that does not pop into your mind when you think of God, if it is not "love," I would love for you to check that little box that says, "Teach me about Jesus," and Pastor Michael and I would love to sit down

with you. If you are at home, you can jump into the online check-in on our website. You can just check a few boxes. We would love to text you, to call you, to e-mail you.

It is a Christmas special, the coffee is on us, and we would love to tell you what we have seen in the writings of the eyewitness account of John, that God is love. He is what you want and he is what you can get. God is love. And because God is love, he did something amazing. Look what John says next. He says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." It is not just you look on God's profile and, oh, yes, love is in the list. It is the stuff that God does to prove his love for people like us.

Actually, it makes me think of this book, "The Five Love Languages." You ever heard of this before? This book has sold, I think, 13 million copies, and I think I have bought about 150 of them. I make every single couple who goes through premarital counseling with me read this book because it has changed my marriage, my parenting, my life. If you are not familiar with the concept, the author, Gary Chapman, claims that people express love, and give love, and receive love in five different ways - gifts, time, touch, words, and works. And that if you really want to make someone feel loved, if you are dating someone, married to someone, raising a kid, or just working with someone that you want to love well, it is really important to know how they best receive love so you know how best to show love.

I was thinking of this book as I thought about Jesus there in a manger, and it dawned on me that the God who is love decided to show love to us in all five ways. Have you ever thought of that before? Jesus is born in the manger and he is God's gift. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." And because Jesus was not some translucent angel or some spirit that floated around, he was a flesh and blood Savior, what could you do with Jesus? You could reach out and touch him. He could embrace people, show them affection. In fact, you could pierce him and nail him to a cross. And on the cross, what did Jesus do? He not only gave the greatest gift, but he served us in the greatest way. The greatest work that could ever be done is a person sacrificing their life for another, which is exactly what Jesus did. And when he rose from the dead, he promised that whoever would believe in him - if you, if I, no matter what our stories or what our pasts, if we would put our faith in Jesus as our Savior, we would get to spend quantity and quality time with God. Eternal life, he called it. Not just a meet and greet, like a VIP visit, like a quick selfie with God, you will get to spend forever with God, where there is no grieving or brokenness, breakups, divorce, anxiety, medication, or pain. And in God's presence, God himself, the God of love, would look you in the eye and he would speak. "I love you," God would say. "You are my son, my daughter," God would say. And forever and ever and ever, for all eternity, we would live in the presence of God and hear the words that would fill up our hearts.

Would you maybe this year, for the first time for some of you in your whole life, seek God first? Be as passionate for God as you are for your job. Learn to seek God and get as excited about God as you are for another 18 holes of golf. Because here is what I know - you tried that before. And we buy another round of gifts, and we go golfing again, and we play fantasy football one more time, and it is a new system, and a new game, and a new update, and a bigger TV, and a fancier TV, and it is great and it feels really good in the moment, but what a person desires in

their heart is unfailing love. And this world can give you beautiful glimpses of God, but it cannot replace the real thing. Would you maybe make the most important decision of your life and seek him? Guys, I especially want to give that challenge to you. You know, I meet a lot of guys who kind of think that church, and faith, and Jesus is kind of like this women and children thing. Have you heard of this before? Statistically, more females will come to a church on any given Sunday than men? But for the Apostle John, that would have been crazy.

Do you know what happened to John and all of his friends who were close to Jesus? They were either tortured or killed for their connection. But, like, you could -- John himself, tradition says, was boiled in oil and survived. He was the only one to make it. Because you could threaten these guys and stone these guys, you could crucify these guys, and they said, "Where else are we going to go to find love like this? What will this world possibly give me? You can threaten me, you can kill me, you can jail me - but I am not giving up the only source of unfailing love that I have never found.

And so, men, I want to challenge you today. If you love the people in your life, lead them to the source. You can buy them another gift if you want, but what they really want is God. And you can take your girlfriend by the hand, you can grab your son and lead him to Jesus, and give him something that this world cannot touch and take away. Our children, our friends, our roommates, and our spouses, they will go through breakups and hardship. Their bodies will fail and their bosses will not be fair, but there is one place they can always go - and guys, you can lead them to it. Seek God with your whole heart and you will find the source of unfailing love.

Here is the last part of his gift, John 4:10. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Are you ever offended by the concept of Christmas? Like, when you see this little statue over here and little baby Jesus is in the manger, and we read, "I bring good news of great joy. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you." Are you ever slightly offended? Because you should be.

Imagine if I gave you a gift of a breath mint. I said, "Here, it is on me. You should take this." I mean, it is a gift and it is a free gift, but what are you immediately thinking? "Is it that bad?" So, it is a free gift, but you know, it comes with a little bit of sting to it, a little bit of judgment, and that is actually what John is saying here. The fancy phrase there, "atoning sacrifice for our sins," is the Bible's way of saying that our sins, our lack of love, they needed to be atoned for because those things that we did made God angry.

It actually makes sense, right? If you love someone deeply, like God loves all people, and I hurt that someone that you love deeply, you have to be mad about it. If you are a dad and I come up to your little kid and I push him to the ground, love gets angry, right? Love is patient, and kind, and beautiful, and important, and so, when you and I sadly do not love, you know, it is not like a Hallmark movie. There are serious implications with the God who is love.

But if you are humble enough to accept that, if you will give up this grand illusion of comparing yourself to really bad people so you can feel like you are good and, "Well, of course, God loves me" - if you could today say to Jesus, "I have messed up, I have sinned. You have every right to

be mad. I have no right to be with you forever, and ever, and ever, but I am coming to you for help," and John would turn to you and say, "Here is love." Not that we would love God, but that God would love people like us, and send his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

About three weeks ago, I got to spend Monday morning with Shirley, a member of our church. It would turn out to be her last Monday here on this earth. And all of you would not have fit into the room that day, but I so wish you could have been there, because that room was filled with so much love. Her daughter, her son, her son-in-law, two of her grandkids, and me, the pastor, and it was abnormal, the way they loved each other, the way that she loved everyone in that room and they loved her right back. The words they spoke, knowing that her days were growing short.

What is even more incredible, though, was the love of God - the way they loved God, the way they knew things about God, the passages they could quote because they have been seeking God for many, many years. Shirley knew she was about to die, but she was not afraid, not even close, because she believed that God is love. And she said to me through the haze of the medication, "Pastor, why does God love me? I am kind of a pain in the backside." I said, "Me, too, Shirley, and that is what makes grace amazing." And then, her little granddaughter, bright fiery red hair, she belts out, out of the blue, like no one else is in the room, "Yes, Jesus loves me!" she sings. "Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so." And the pastor said, "Amen," and let the little girl preach. And a couple of days later, Shirley took her last breath and saw the smiling face of a God who is love, and you can, too. Merry Christmas, everyone. Our God, he is love.

Let us pray.

Oh, Father, I am so jealous of Shirley. I am trying to picture you right now with a smile across your face because we are forgiven for every sin. You are not ashamed of us, embarrassed of us. Everyone who calls on the name of Jesus is saved from all of that. So, God, today, thank you so much for your unfailing love. I pray for everyone here, everyone who is listening, that their lives would be filled with so much love, from family members, friends, from their pastor, from this church.

But God, even more than those temporary examples of love, I pray that you would fill their hearts with you, with yourself, with the love that never fails. It is what we were created to crave, and as one old Christian said, "Our hearts will be restless until they find rest in you."

God, help us as we think of this love to love each other. Our world right now needs so much love. It needs people who are patient, people who are humble, people who are generous, and people who are kind. The people who do not pick and choose who they are going to love and how much, but who just give love, like the kind of love that you give to the world. The world needs us to be that, God, so help us to be that.

And when we fall short and when we fail, help us to look up and see your face still smiling, because you have continued and always will be love. We pray all of these things, Jesus, in your beautiful name. Amen.