

What Is Christian Love

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who showed us what true love means, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

Love is an elusive word. I mean I love (SLIDE) my dogs and I love chocolate, but I don't love them in the same way that I love my dear wife and partner, PJ. I don't love PJ the same way that I love Jesus either. In my experience, I've often found doing the loving thing isn't always easy to know, let alone do. Several years ago I played Schroeder in the musical "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown. Ever since then, I've read many of the comic strips, especially the ones that feature Shroeder. This week I came across one where Lucy, who has a crush on Shroeder, asks if he knows what love is. (SLIDE) Shroeder stops playing and reads from his dictionary, "Love: Noun, to be fond of, a strong affection for or an attachment or devotion to a person or persons." Then he sat back down and resumed playing his piano. Lucy sat there stunned and then murmured sarcastically, "On paper, he's great." That's the kind of love that First John is writing about. Love on paper. Long on sentiment, short on action. In the Bible love is not a noun, it's a verb. You can't really know what love is from an emotional point of view or only as a feeling. The only way we can show love or to know we're loved, is with our actions. There are some characteristics of Christian love that we ought to consider this morning. The writer of First John gives us some standards for knowing if our love is genuine Christian love.

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First of all, Christian love is always in keeping with God's Commandments.

(SLIDE) Several times in this passage the writer speaks of "keeping (God's) commandments." This is obviously an important issue for the author. Now I realize there may be occasions where the loving thing to do conflicts with the Law of God, but that doesn't mean the Law has been rendered null and void because of love. Yes, Jesus broke the Sabbath Law on several occasions, but he did it in order to show love and mercy to the blind, the lame, lepers, and the demon possessed. Today it's often hard to know when to invoke the law of love versus the actual Law of God. Our society has succumbed to something called situational ethics where you can just about justify anything. Make no mistake about it, Jesus did not abolish the Law. He said as much when he told the crowd he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Jesus also said unless you fulfill every jot and tittle of the law you can never go to heaven. Love will never go against the known will of God. Be careful if anybody tries to tell you something is the loving thing to do if it conflicts with the commandments of God. Jesus did not say the commandment to love makes the Ten Commandments obsolete. He said simply all the law and prophets depend on love for God and love for humanity. First John tells us to love God **IS** to keep his commandments. Christian love is always in keeping with God's commandments.

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In the second place, Christian love is always “in mission.” (SLIDE) There is no love for God that is not coupled with love for people. The self-righteous, self-centered, “Lone Ranger” kind of Christian is basically no Christian at all. That’s harsh, but it’s true. Here’s what I mean... The New Testament is full of encounters between the religious leaders and Jesus. It was not the Jewish faith that offended Jesus. He was himself a Jew. It was those who used their religion as a bludgeon to elevate themselves by beating down others who were the object of his great scorn. Equally as offensive, however, in Christ’s eyes are those nice, sweet Christians who have good intentions about real service to the world, but never really seem to get into action. Consider our obligations to the poor and dispossessed of this world. A major portion of the world’s wealth is concentrated in so called “Christian” nations. What better plan could God have for meeting the needs of the unfortunate of this world than have his people to share out of their abundance?

I’m reminded of a ridiculous old story about a fisherman who was enormously successful. (SLIDE) Each morning he would take his small boat out on the lake and within a few hours he would return with a boat loaded with fish. People wondered, how did he do it? One day a stranger showed up and asked the man if he could go along the next time the man went out fishing. The man said, “Sure. Meet me here tomorrow morning at 5:00 and we will go out.” The next

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morning the two of them made their way through the early morning mist to a small cove where the fisherman stopped the boat and cut off the motor. The stranger wondered where the man's fishing equipment was. He had no rod and reel. All the stranger saw was a small net and a rusty tackle box. Slowly the man pulled the tackle box over to himself, opened it, and took out a red stick of dynamite. Taking a match, he lit the fuse of the dynamite, held it for a moment and heaved it into the water. There was a terrific blast. Soon he was dipping up fish in his small net and filling up the boat. After watching this the stranger reached into his hip pocket and pulled out his wallet. Opening up the wallet he flashed the badge of a game warden. Somberly he said, "You're under arrest." This didn't seem to rattle the fisherman. He reached into the tackle box, pulled out another stick of dynamite, lit it, held it for a moment while the fuse burned on down, then handed it to the game warden. "Now," he said, "Are you just going to sit there or are you going to fish?" That's the question I get from our lesson from I John. "Are you going to sit there or are you going to fish?" First John tells us, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (SLIDE) In other words, anybody can say "I love you." Words are cheap. Action counts. The second thing we can glean from First John is that Christian love is always in mission to aid and help our neighbors both near and far away.

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There is one final thing to be said. Christian love is always a response to God's love for us. (SLIDE) First John links our ability to love to our faith in Jesus Christ. It has become fashionable in recent years to emphasize the importance of self-love. Often we hear that we cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. There is some truth to that, obviously, but there is also a grave danger. WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES US LOVEABLE? Is it our sparkling personalities or our shining faces? Is it our moral righteousness or our generous spirit? (SLIDE) If you say, "Yes," here, you might need a refresher in Lutheran Catechism. Deep within the hearts of every human being is the potential for unspeakable evil. That is the one lesson of all history. If people could look into our hearts, most of us would be unlovable from our very core. There is only one way that we can truly love ourselves. That is to see that we love because GOD FIRST LOVED US. (SLIDE) Look around you at the results of a decade of emphasis on self-love. Many of us are so into ourselves that we have lost the ability to truly love others. Our own unworthiness stands in stark contrast to God's great love for us. When we really see ourselves for who and what we are, we realize the only thing that makes us lovable is the fact that God loves us and gives us our value and our worth. That is why we Lutherans place such high value on the theology of the cross. (SLIDE) We simply cannot understand what real love is until we see the suffering Christ giving his life to redeem us from the cross. The Greek word that

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we often employ to express God's love is "agape." Somewhere I heard about a delegate to a church assembly who kept hearing the word "agape" used but had no idea what it meant. He did not want to show his ignorance by asking, so he found a dictionary and looked it up. (SLIDE) For the word agape the dictionary said it meant "with mouth wide open." If we understand the cross and the wonderful love which is expressed there, we will stand there with our "mouth wide open." It's amazing that in spite of our unworthiness, the God of all creation loves us each as his own children. That is what gives us the ability to love ourselves as well as our ability to love others.

(SLIDE) What is Christian love? It is love that acknowledges the commandments of God. It is love that acknowledges that we cannot love God if we cannot love our fellow human beings. It is love that is a response to the love of God made manifest through the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is love not only in word and speech but in truth and action. It is love that doesn't just sit there. It fishes!

May you experience the amazing love of God and be moved to even greater acts of love and kindness. May you be moved to act in love toward all our neighbors. May the God of love bless you as you continue to demonstrate your love for God by seeking, welcoming and serving all. Amen.