

LOVE EXPLAINED

Devotion

[Please provide: hymnals or copies of "Joy to the World" for each attendee.]

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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9–11 NIV).

It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas, the most joyous season of the year! Soon we will again celebrate the best gift ever given — the gift of God's love in His Son, Christ Jesus! As we eagerly await the birth of the Christ Child, our days are filled with preparation. We decorate our Christmas trees and our homes; shop for gifts; send Christmas cards; bake the family-favorite cookies; attend Advent services, choir rehearsals, and program practices; entertain guests; plus a dozen other things!

Growing tired and weary from the stress and busyness of the season may cause us to be less than loving. At those times our attention is often focused on getting everything done just perfectly rather than on the Christ Child, whose birth is the real reason for celebration. Could it be that we are more concerned about children and grandchildren thinking less of us if everything is not up to par, rather than making sure our words and actions reflect God's great love in Jesus? Are we making ourselves rather than the Babe-in-the-manger the center of the season? Are we giving in to frustration as we begin to think "I will be glad when it is January," instead of savoring the wonders of Christmas as we rest on Christ the King?

God's love for us is so awesome! We are so unworthy of this gift of the baby Jesus! As stated in the Scripture, God did not send this wonderful gift from heaven because we loved Him. Our sinfulness disappoints Him greatly. Each day we fail to fulfill His expectations and instead follow the ways of the world and our sinful human nature. How often we succumb to the temptations Satan sets before us. Yet God loves us so much that He sent His only Son to be born a human being and suffer the horrific agony and ultimate crucifixion so that we might once again be His children! We cannot possibly imagine such unfathomable love!

When we keep Christ as the focus of all our Christmas preparations, the joy of the season will fill our hearts and will enable us to keep things in perspective. Daily prayer, thanking God for this wonderful gift of love, and asking Him to send His Holy Spirit to help us respond by loving one another and keeping our mind from getting caught up in the secular celebration of the "holiday" season. By focusing on Christ, we can strive to keep Christ in Christmas!

As we once again prepare for this joyous event, may any effort or inconvenience seem trite compared to the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. Decorating our homes and Christmas trees with lights, angels, stars, and candles reminds us of Jesus, the Light of the world being born on that first Christmas. The angels sang “Gloria,” and the Magi followed the star and brought sweet-smelling gifts to the Babe-in-the-manger. The shiny tree ornaments reflect the light, just as we are to reflect God’s love to everyone. The Advent wreath and the manger scene in a prominent place remind us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child.

Sending Christmas cards with a Christian message is an excellent opportunity to share the Good News. Say a prayer for the person or family as each card is addressed. While shopping, we may consider presenting the clerk or waitress with a *Mustard Seed* or tract inviting them to our church’s Christmas services. We should remember to SMILE and to be polite as we weave through the crowds and are perhaps tempted to become impatient with an inept clerk.

Presenting gifts to those special people in our lives is symbolic of that greatest gift, Baby Jesus. Christmas shopping is not meant to “break the bank” or to buy the favor of our children or grandchildren. The gift will soon be forgotten, but the love of Jesus that we demonstrate in our living and in our giving will be remembered always.

Rather than fretting over every dust ball, let us make some cookies, even if they are the ready-to-bake kind, and take a plate to a person who is lonely or a shut-in. Making the visit will warm our heart, as well as the heart of the person visited.

There are many ways the love of God in Christ Jesus can be shared. Because God has opened our hearts to His great love for us, the love from Jesus brings joy and peace to our souls, as it becomes the motivation in our Christmas preparation.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You wholeheartedly for Your abounding love for us in sending Your only Son to save us from our sin. We are so undeserving. We plead with You to fill our hearts with Your love so that we can truly love others. Left to ourselves, we can only demonstrate a self-seeking love. Grant us joy and peace that only You can provide as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, our precious Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Sing: “Joy to the World” (*LSB* 387).

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