



CALVARY
TUSCALOOSA

TEACHING PLAN
DECEMBER 13, 2020



LOVE

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PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 1:26-38. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: God provided love both now and forever through Jesus Christ.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: God's love for us impacts our daily lives.

GOSPEL CONNECTION: We experience God's love most fully through Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

- 1 What does it mean to love someone?
- 2 How do you know if a person is a genuinely loving person?
- 3 Is it possible to love someone that you do not like? Explain.

Love is a popular subject. Blockbuster movies are made about it, hit songs are written about it, and everyone hopes to enjoy it. But real love (or “true love” as Hollywood puts it) is hard to define with precision. If you were to ask ten random people about their definition of love, you are likely to come up with just as many distinct explanations.

Biblical love is radically different than the love the popular culture holds in high regard. In our culture, love is associated with *my* need and *my* feelings. Biblical love, real love, however, doesn’t have a lot in common with that self-centered conception. The Bible says that love is “not self-seeking” (1 Cor. 13:5). The Bible says that Christians are to love even their enemies (Matt. 5:44).

In our text today, we will consider God’s love toward His people as well as how His people ought to respond when they experience God’s divine love. Love is a key theme in the life of the Christian, but it is especially important to consider during the Advent season when we remember the greatest act of love in history.

ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION

How would you define love?

How do you think biblical love differs from what we generally think love is like?

True, biblical love gives a person what they need (even if they don’t want it). It isn’t true love to flatter and pander to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. Real, biblical love isn’t afraid to hurt someone’s feelings. Not that we should look to hurt a person’s feelings, but we ought to never neglect wounding someone because it hurts when that wound is actually for their greater good and well being.

It may seem unloving for God to disrupt Joseph and Mary’s life as He did. They had a bright future ahead of them, but God showed His love toward them and the world by changing their plans. In our text today, we will consider the nature of God’s love and how it affects us.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Notes:

In our passage today, we will read and consider the implications of the angel's announcement to Mary. Mary is often considered a heroine in the Christmas story because of her meekness and humility. This young, unknown woman who was betrothed to an unknown carpenter was called upon to trust in the Lord in a way that no one in the history of the world had been called upon before. She showed great faith in and love for God in her response. Mary was, in some ways, a reflection of God's selfless love toward His people. She willingly underwent suffering and shame out of love for her God. Christ willingly underwent suffering and shame out of love for His people.

Joseph's example, though rarely mentioned, is also a picture of God's gracious love toward His people. It was a selfless act for Joseph to determine to divorce Mary quietly. When Joseph discovered that his soon-to-be wife was pregnant, there was only one conclusion that he could reasonably draw. Of course, it wasn't true, but Joseph had no way of knowing what had happened. Yet, he was determined to divorce her quietly. This would have shielded Mary from even more dishonor and public shame. This was surely an act of lovingkindness that is worthy of recognition and emulation.

Mary's love for God and Joseph's love for Mary ought to prepare our hearts for the greatest act of love the world has ever known. Mary and Joseph's love gives us a glimpse at the love of God. The coming of the Messiah put that love in full blazing view of any who would believe. Christ in a manger (that would eventually lead to a cross) was the divine, eternal, and unfathomable love of God toward His people.

In this passage, we will turn our focus from Mary and Joseph and consider God's love and how it is expressed in the narrative found in Luke 1:26-38.

> Have a volunteer read Luke 1:26-33.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Notes:

God's love preceded Mary's devotion and obedience. This is an important principle because Christians are prone to begin to think that they must bring the love of God down upon them by first proving their devotion and love for God. Although this is a common Western conception of gaining favor, it is the opposite of the biblical conception of the love of God.

- What are some examples of God loving His people before they loved them throughout the Bible?

From the very beginning, we see that God is the initiator of a relationship with people by expressions of love. For example, God created Adam and Eve and they responded to that act of love by loving Him back. Also, when Adam and Eve sinned, God sought them out even though they were hiding. Then, if we skip to Genesis 4, we see God coming to Cain to warn him against sin. God is the initiator. John wrote, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

God first loved us, and as a Christian grows in Christ, he or she will see more and more that any acts of devotion offered up to God are always preceded by God's lovingkindness. Of course, the Bible commands Christians to love God and one another, but we should never take those commands to eclipse the fundamental reality that God's love is the prime motivation in all of our demonstrations of godly love.

Notes:

- If we understood that our acts of love and devotion were prompted by God's lovingkindness toward us, how would that change the way we view ourselves?

If our acts of selflessness, kindness, compassion, and mercy are rooted in those same kinds of acts of God toward us, then we have no right to boast or take pride in our good works. All of them come about as a result of God's initiative. If we are able to display divine, selfless love, it is in response to His divine, selfless love.

We understand love in the same way we understand all other good works in the Christian life. We don't bring anything to the table that God has not first provided us. No good work proceeds from us independently of our Maker. If you are a Christian, then you have been rescued from the penalty of sin, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and adopted into God's family. Now that you have been made alive in Christ, you can love Him and others as you have been loved. It is a serious error, however, to think that any of this ability to love springs from within you independently from the work of the Spirit in your life.

- What is God's love like? How do we see God's love revealed in today's passage? How is this tied to God's love revealed throughout the Bible?

Paul gave the Ephesians an excellent definition of love: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph. 5:1–2). Christ gave Himself up for poor sinners at Golgotha. On the wooden cross, He bore the wrath of God the Father so that we would not have to. Love led him to the cross! This act of love began by the coming of Christ into the world as a baby.

Notes:

The divine love of God is sacrificial and selfless. This is the difference between Biblical love and our culture’s view of love. Biblical love isn’t simply good feelings toward someone, but unconditionally giving oneself for the good of another. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16).

- How does God’s love differ from what many people call love today?

What people call love today, oftentimes, is a far cry from the love of God because it is conditional and can often be manipulative. For example, have you ever known someone who would withhold their love from others until their desires were met?

Contrast this with the coming of Jesus Christ. All people on earth stood condemned as sinners before God. Every person has fallen short of God’s glorious standard. All who lived before Christ were rebels. Not only that, but everyone who would live afterwards would be depraved, corrupted, and sinful. Despite this fact, God the Son took on flesh to save sinners because of the great love of God toward His people.

> Have a volunteer read Luke 1:34-38.

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” ³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God.” ³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Notes:

When Mary heard the announcement from the angel she said, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” This is a reasonable question, yet the Bible doesn’t portray her as a doubter. Thus, we may interpret her question not as a sign of her doubt, but of her faith. Sometimes we ask questions because we expect something to happen and we want to know as much as we can about it because of our joy at the prospect. For example, a child may, upon hearing the news of an upcoming trip to their grandparents’ house, ask many questions about the details of the visit in their excitement. They don’t doubt that it is going to happen. In fact, their firm belief that it will happen is what compels them to ask about it.

- How did Mary’s response affirm her faith in God?

Mary believed God and said, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Mary’s response to God’s kindness and love toward her was obedience and faith toward God. Mary responded to God’s love with her feeble human love. This is a key principle throughout the Bible. It is especially emphasized in the life of those who are in Christ. The principle is this: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The appropriate response of a Christian who has experienced the love of God in Christ isn't just a shift in allegiance. Rather, the Christian who has truly experienced the love of God cannot help but love. We are to imitate God by demonstrating the love he has shown us.

Notes:

- To whom should Christians express selfless, sacrificial love? What should that love look like?

Jesus made it clear in Matthew 22:37-39 that Christians should love both God and people. Followers of Christ make loving God their top priority. Their second priority, however, is loving their neighbor. The Bible makes it clear that the natural reaction to God loving us is for us to love others. A Christian cannot possibly claim to love God while hating others, especially those in the household of God (1 John 4:20).

Christians are to be imitators of God by demonstrating the kind of love that God has shown them. We get the particulars of this command by availing ourselves to the nature of God's love. And we have already seen that the love of God is more than just a feeling, it is action for the good of the other.

Furthermore, God's love isn't conditioned upon the loveliness of a person. If it were, then no one would find themselves loved by God, for all have sinned and fall short. Similarly, we don't demonstrate love only to the lovely, or those who will be able to reciprocate in kind. Christian love isn't predicated on what can be gained in return. Rather, Christian love is based in the experience of God's love. In other words, we demonstrate love to our neighbor because God has demonstrated His love toward us in Christ.

- What empowers Christians to demonstrate this type of love to others?

Notes:

Paul alluded to this empowerment in Philippians 1:8 when we wrote, “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Paul’s love for the Philippian church was a supernatural kind of love. He said that his affection was based in Christ Jesus. Love that is based in human emotion wears out. This happens to everyone. The only kind of love that endures in spite of heartache and difficulty in tough circumstances is God’s love—the affection of Jesus Christ. It’s the only kind of love that lasts.

God’s love is not something that you produce by yourself. Rather, it is something, to use Paul’s language, that is poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). God’s love is something He does in us and through us. It is a gift that keeps us in step with the Spirit moment by moment.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- 1 How does God's love differ from the world's conception of love?
- 2 Have you experienced God's love in Christ? In what ways?
- 3 Do you think that the way you love others (spouse, children, friends, church members) is more akin to the world's love or divine love? Why?
- 4 What are some practical ways that you can demonstrate the love of God during the Advent season?

PRAY

Praise God and give Him thanks for the love that He has shown to the world and to you by sending His only begotten Son to die upon a cross to pay the penalty for sins. Ask the Lord to use you and our church to share the love of God by announcing the gospel to lost neighbors, friends, and strangers.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - How has your idea of love been challenged through this week's study?
 - How is God calling you to act to show His love to others?
- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- > The challenge to memorize Luke 1:38.

LUKE 1:26-38

1:26. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, God took the second step in his climatic act in salvation history. The scene of action was far from the nation's religious center where Zechariah sacrificed and met Gabriel, far even from the Judean hill country of Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel was again in action, but this time in Nazareth—an insignificant village known only as the home base for the eighteenth of the twenty-four courses of priests.

Notes:

1:27. The virgin birth is Luke's central emphasis in this section. Having set the scene in verse 26, he begins the narrative with the words to a virgin. He will conclude this narrative section by telling how the virgin birth is God's possible impossibility (vv. 34–37). The epilogue to the narrative (v. 38) shows Mary's willingness to be a part of God's impossible acts.

Mary the virgin was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. The language comes from Deuteronomy 22:23. It describes an engagement, the result of a public ceremony before witnesses by which a man and woman were legally considered married but did not live or sleep together. At this stage the bride price had already been paid to the woman's family, and the man had legal responsibility for the woman. This engagement could be broken only through divorce. Engagement usually lasted about a year, with the girl living with her parents. Often the girl was only twelve to fourteen years old. In the forerunner's birth, the expectant father occupied center stage. Here it is the expectant mother. The father is mentioned at this point only to introduce his Davidic ancestry.

1:28. Mary is the highly favored one—the recipient of a special blessing from God. She has experienced God's undeserved, unmerited grace in

a special way. This does not change who Mary is or give her a status beyond other people. It singles her out as a special instrument whom God chose to use in his gracious plan of salvation. The grace Mary received was God's presence with her.

Notes:

1:29. The highly favored becomes the greatly troubled. Luke uses *Siata-paxthe*, the only appearance of the word in the New Testament. It describes something thoroughly stirred up, confused, and perplexed. A divine messenger should be enough to stir up confusion in a young teenager. An angel who promises a special audience with God is even more confusing. So Mary stirred these thoughts around in her mind, trying to find a meaning to them and the steps to take in light of them. She had never received such a greeting! What was she to make of it?

1:30. The heavenly messenger understood her troubled mind, so the angel repeated the comforting words Zechariah had heard (v. 13): Do not be afraid. Why should she not be afraid? Mary found favor. The Greek word is *xaris*—unmerited, undeserved grace from God. God's grace removes all fear.

1:31–33. The angel's message did not ease Mary's confused mind immediately—not with a divine birth announcement for a baby named "Yahweh is salvation." Not with an explanation that this baby would be the new David, king over all Israel, bearing the awesome title, "Son of God" (see Ps. 2:7). But what a kingdom—an eternal rule without end. No other king had such a kingdom! Who could this baby be?

1:34. Confusion reigned. Mary's questions poured forth. One major obstacle to such a "blessed event" was that she was a virgin. A birth announcement to her was premature, if not nonsense.

1:35. God's messenger had the answer. The Holy Spirit would work a miracle. This child would be born through a special miracle of God—the creation of God's Son in a human womb. This Son of God would be different from kings in Jerusalem. He would be the holy one.

Notes:

1:36–37. Mary's was not the only divine miracle. Elizabeth the barren one would be Elizabeth the rejoicing mother. Her six-month pregnancy verified that God was at work again in mysteriously wonderful ways. He does the impossible. Then and now!

1:38. In humble submission, Mary was now ready to serve God and follow his will. As pregnancy had lifted Elizabeth's disgrace it would soon bring the virgin Mary disgrace. Both agreed to do what God required (see v. 25). With his mission accomplished, the angel left.