

Nothing From Nothing

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[0 : 00] The second day of Advent. Wow. The year has gone by and has been a year, but we praise God for His mercy and grace.

We praise God for Jesus. He's the reason for this season, I'm told. I don't know if you've heard that before, but I'm told that's true, that He's the reason for this season. And so we rejoice.

Father, hear our cry. Hear our cry. Open our hearts to receive Your Word. Open our hearts to behold Jesus.

Illuminate our hearts so that, Lord, we can grasp what You are saying to us from Your Word and apply it to our hearts and lives and see You transform us as Your people. Hear our cry. Hear our cry for more of You.

Oh, we need more of You in our life. Help us to surrender more of ourselves. May this Advent season provide spiritual renewal for all of us who trust in Jesus.

[1 : 18] Thank You for the privilege of knowing You and worshiping You and being a part of this fellowship to worship the living God and serve You in this place.

Thank You for the honor and the privilege. Speak now, for Your servants are listening, and use Your unworthy servant to make it clear.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. 1 Corinthians chapter 13, verses 20.

I'm sorry, beginning of verse chapter 12, actually. The last verse, chapter 12, verse 31. And then 13 to verse 3. We'll be working through this passage at this Advent season, chapter 13, that is.

We're working through this together. Hear now the word of the living God. But earnestly desire the higher gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way.

[2 : 24] If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

That is the word of the Lord. Please be seated. Thanks again, priest. Thank you. They say love is in the air every Christmas.

That's one of the most common meanings, giving to Christmas, when celebrities are asked about the meaning of Christmas. Some will say family and friends.

Giving. But it all comes down to the same thing. Love. And this is true. Christmas is about love.

[3 : 48] That is the Christmas message. But the problem is, what God means by love is a little different than what humanity means by love.

For some people, love means sex. For some, around this time, it means parties with friends. For others, it means good sentimental feelings of yesteryear.

So just saying Christmas is love falls kind of flat. See, the only reason we have any idea of love is because we are made in the image of God.

The three members of the blessed Holy Trinity have lived in loving relationship for all eternity. But the problem is, we've rebelled against God, so our practice of love and even our understanding of love becomes very flawed.

The truth is, we don't really know how to love without revelation from God. So God in Christ demonstrates what love is.

[5 : 04] He demonstrates the kind of love that transforms us, and then a love that causes those around us to flourish. And I have to tell you that churches and Christians after COVID are in such great need of reclaiming God's love in our fellowships.

You actually can't express love fully without a commitment to community. For we're all very loving when we're by ourselves.

But when we get together, now we find out how loving you really are. So this year, I'd like to spend our time looking at Christmas love.

Christmas love is a love that believes it is more blessed to give than receive. And therefore, it does receive. So I guess the big question is this year, how's your love like?

Before we begin this passage briefly, I just want to offer a brief justification for preaching on love as a Christmas series. I'm indebted to Dr. Sinclair Ferguson in his nifty little book, *Love Came Down at Christmas*.

[6 : 28] You're going to hear from him throughout this series, I think, from time to time. He said Christmas is about love because love came down at Christmas. That's why we have Christmas in the first place.

The meaning of Christmas is found in the message of Christmas. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3, 16, love came down. That's Christmas. Love invades humanity.

Divine love, true love, real love, impacted our world at the first Christmas.

So much so that later the Apostle Paul will write in Ephesians 3, 16 through 19, he says that according to the—he's praying for us, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you with strength, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

[7 : 36] Why do we need to be strengthened with power through the Spirit of God in our inner being? Why do we need the strength? So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints.

Listen, listen to that. With all the saints, this love is to be experienced in community. Not by yourself, in community. With all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth?

And to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Love came down that love might fill us.

And that love is in Jesus. And we are meant to experience that love together as the body of Christ. We need to experience more of this great matchless love of God in Christ. And when this happens, our churches will look more like 1 Corinthians 13.

[8 : 53] And what Jesus our Lord said will be more and more true of us. In John 13, 34 to 35, he says, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples. That's a powerful statement.

This love that is divine, that has come down at Christmas, and that now Paul says the Spirit wants to fill us with this love.

That same love, Paul says, marks us. Marks us as his disciples. It bears witness to the world that Jesus is real and that we are following a living, risen, and ascended Christ.

It bears witness. And what is this love? How do we, what is, I mean, love, defining love, right?

That's one of the great mysteries of the universe in one sense.

[10 : 09] But how? The group, the word, you all know this, the word that Paul used, agape or agapao, the idea behind that is a self-sacrificial caring that seeks the highest good of this object.

That's the love he's talking about. Self-sacrificing, sacrificial, that seeks the highest good.

In other words, not doing what's best for me, but love, and not demanding you do what's best for me, but love says, how can I do the best for Banked?

How can I do the best for Willie? How can I do the best for the Evans family? Love gives.

And Jesus told us, remember this, this is very important, because I know some of you are thinking, because this is what the culture tells us. If you give and give, you're going to lose.

[11 : 22] You're not, you got to look out for yourself. What are you getting? Listen to the scriptures. Jesus says, give, and it shall be given to you. Press down, shaking together, and running over, will men give into your bosom.

not get, and it will be given to you. Give, and it will be given to you. The culture flips it around, and we have bought it.

What can you do for me? You're not loving me well. How are you loving? It's the real question.

How am I loving you? How am I loving? Not how are you loving me? How am I loving you? And loving Christ, the risen one.

Give, and it shall be given. So let's dive into this. Let's dive all through this passage that you know so well. Paul, in this passage, in this context, he's been discussing spiritual gifts.

[12:30] In chapter 12, he was doing it to show how every member of the church is interdependent upon the other members of the church. In other words, we need each other.

He uses the image of the human body, and that was perfect because my arms need my fingers. For my body to work, my arm needs my legs, and I need my head.

I mean, he's making it clear how the human body is interdependent, and so is the body of Christ interdependent. And so he walks us through that in chapter 12.

Here's the funny thing about chapter 12, though. The reason he writes it, people were elevating a particular gift. A particular part of the body was being elevated, and it was speaking in tongues.

And Paul was like, okay, guys, the tongue speaker needs the gift of mercy, and et cetera. You just can't elevate one gift. And we do that today. I grew up in that kind of church that elevated the gift of speaking in tongues.

[13:35] And it didn't work too well, actually. It never works when you elevate one gift above another. And Paul talks about that. That's why he writes this chapter.

Even to chapter 14, he's going to come back and say, listen, speaking in tongues is great, but I wish you all would prophesy. Because prophecy is speaking to the body, the word of God.

It's speaking to the body, that which will build up the body, and not just yourself. He makes the point that speaking in tongues is about you. But prophecy is about the body.

He says, better that you prophesy. You see how the Bible shows us that church is not about you?

He gives us the gift, chapter 12 says, for the common good of the body.

My gift is for you. Your gift is for me. It's not about, you will, I will get built up in the giving and using of my gift to build you up.

[14:35] Woo. That's not American Christianity, I'm telling you right now. That's not church life. I hate to say it, but it's true. We've fallen for the world's lies.

But then in chapter 12, verse 31, he begins to shift gears. He says to the church, yeah, you need to, tongues and whatever, that's great.

But in chapter 12, verse 31, he says, there's a better or superior way than focusing on gifts. And that's chapter 13. What's better than talking about how can I use my gifts?

What's better than that? How can I love? How can I love? love? We read chapter 13 today as a poem of love for weddings.

And it is beautiful, isn't it? I didn't read that section, but you know, the part where love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy or boast, not arrogant or rude, does not insist, ooh, it does not insist on its own way.

[15:48] It is not irritable or resentful. Wow. Does not rejoice at wrongdoing, rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. And we read that at weddings and people are going, oh. No.

That's not how Paul wrote it. And that's not how the Corinthians received it. It was a slap in their face. That church was messed up.

Lawsuits against one another in church, going to the courts against one another, abusing the Lord's sufferer with classism. I mean, everything goes on.

They were a mess, divisions in the church. I am a Paul. I am a Paul. Another guy says, I am a Peter. Another guy got, another guy got real spiritual. I'm a Jesus. I mean, they're divided and they're doing, acting like Paul even says to them.

[16:52] Here's what he says to them. All this division in the church, he says in 1 Corinthians 3, what did he say? Listen to this. Our brothers cannot address you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

Infants. He was saying, you are spiritually immature. The divisions in the body. Come on, this is what we've been going through since COVID hit America.

The church is being divided over politics and tribalism and all race. And what does it tell you? What does Paul say? We're spiritual babies.

That's what he's saying. And then he comes to chapter 13 and he says, the real issue is, you don't know how to love. I'm convicted, y'all.

I don't know about you, but this has hit me all kinds of ways. Phil Reichen, my friend, says this, his book, Loving the Way Jesus Loves.

[17 : 54] He says, instead of preparing people for marriage, the apostle was trying desperately to show a church full of self-centered Christians that there is a better way to live.

Not just on your wedding day, but every day for the rest of your life. What is this better way to live? I got three points real quick. Verse one.

I'm going to use an equation, okay, for each one of these points. You'll see it. Great speech minus love equals nothing. Now, I'm going to change nothing to noise.

Great speech minus love equals noise. That's verse one. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Speech. He's talking about our speech here. It is striking that at Christmas we are surrounded in the Bible and even in our own culture by angels and music.

[19 : 00] That's how Christmas begins. with angels and music. The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary and Joseph. Angels are the first heralds of the birth of Jesus. There's even an angelic choir.

Angels appear to Joseph to cause him to leave the country to protect the life of the baby Jesus. And then another angel is sent by God to Joseph again to say, it's okay, you can go back to Israel.

Angels are messengers. That is what the word angel means. They are all inspiring beings reflecting the glory of God.

But they don't draw attention to themselves. They always come with a message from God.

Therefore, their speech is very great and very important.

Angels speak, we would say, the language of heaven, heavenly speech. But when they speak to us, they also speak our language. And when they speak to us, if you ignore their words, you do so at your own peril.

[20 : 08] So angel speech is great. To speak angel? If you can speak angel, you've got something going on. Maybe some thought their tongue language was angelic.

That's why Paul maybe uses that kind of thinking. But listen, human speech can be impressive too, the tongues of men. We think of the songs recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

Did you notice that? I preached a series of Christmas, Christmas, on those songs. Impressive speech. You've got Mary's Magnificat. You've got Zechariah's Benedictus.

He blesses the people. You've got the angelic choir, what we call the Gloria and Exaltus Deo.

You've got Simeon's song, what's called Denunc Dementis.

It means now depart. That's what he says. Now I can depart. Now I can die, Lord. I've seen your salvation. I mean, that's amazing.

[21 : 08] But there's also very gifted speakers. Apollos, if you read the book of Acts, he was considered a very gifted preacher. And I've known some gifted preachers myself. I mean, I think of one man, I love him.

His name is Walford Thompson. I call Walford the Billigram of the Caribbean. Walford is from the island of St. Vincent. He's an older man now.

I remember he would come to our church in Miami and he would preach the one of the most eloquent preachers. And biblical, biblical, but in beautifully eloquent.

Oh my gosh. I mean, I told him, I said, Walford, can I just travel with you? I'll carry your Bible. I was serious. Can I go with you from time to time?

I just want to hear you preach. We have gifted orators, gifted people who, you've known some gifted orators in your life, I'm sure, who can speak and amazing gifts of speech.

[22 : 08] But then Paul says, all your amazing gifts mean nothing if you don't have love. You're just noise. He says, you're a gong.

Do you ever hear a gong? You remember the gong show? You remember that? I mean, I think they did a reboot of that. But, I mean, if you'd be doing your activity, you're trying to, some kind of talent you're displaying, if they didn't like it, they would hit this gong.

Boom. That means you were done. Get off the stage. He says, he's just a noise. Then he says, clanging cymbals. Now, here's the thing about cymbals.

They can be used for music. If used rightly. But what Paul is describing is what I call infantile cymbals.

Where babies just grab the cymbals and go, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And believe me, the child, the baby loves it. But the rest of us are going, oh my goodness.

[23 : 11] Please stop. Please. Please. He says, that's what you're like when you, when you, no matter how impressive your speech is, no matter how full of theology your speech is, no matter how eloquent and educated your speech is, no matter how your speech rhymes, maybe you got flow.

and the spoken word flows off your tongue. It means zero if it's not done out of the love of God and Christ and love for those who hear you.

You're just a noise. Second, he says, great gifts minus love equals nothing. Verse two, if I have prophetic powers, I understand all mystery.

Now, now watch the word all repeated here. If I have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, he says, I am nothing.

I love how Paul puts himself in this. He's talking about if I serve this way as an apostle, if I serve this way, I'm not. This he's talking about himself, but he's also making it clear to them too.

[24 : 27] Christmas is God's revelation to us. In the coming of the God-man, we see prophecy fulfilled. Mystery is made clear.

Mystery in the Bible is that which God had hidden but now has revealed. Mystery is explained. Knowledge is given and it's all knowledge, all mystery.

And notice, then you have all faith is given. This is not saving faith he's talking about. Saving faith is a given here. He's talking about the kind of faith that he says that moves mountains.

The kind of faith that has the ability to believe God for the impossible. Some of you have that gift of faith. I don't care what happens, you just know that God is going to come through. You just know you believe God for big things.

Praise God for people who have that kind of mountain-moving faith. I think Paul was thinking about Jesus. And in Matthew 17, 20, Jesus said, they were asking the question why they couldn't cast out a demon, his disciples.

[25 : 29] He said to them, because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there, it will move.

And nothing will be impossible for you. So hold it now. Paul's talking about all faith that seems to be at least grain of mustard seed kind of faith.

You don't need a lot of faith. All faith just trust in a great Savior. The object of your faith is really where it's at.

And he says, you can have all faith believing in a big God, having big God theology. But if you don't have love, spiritual, he's talking about spiritual giants, I think here.

St. Carl Ferguson says, you should keep a careful watch on people who claim to have special gifts. In particular, you need to watch their lifestyle. Having special gifts, even extraordinary ones, is not a mark of grace.

[26 : 50] We get all excited when this person is a great speaker or a great writer and we get, woo! But watch the life. Great gifts does not necessarily mean great grace.

Jesus said it too. See, they got it from Jesus. Matthew 7, 21 and 23. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

What is God's will? Jesus, love one another as I have loved you. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, here it goes. Did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons?

Listen, in your name and do many mighty works in your name. And then I will declare to them, this is one of the most scary verses in the Bible to me.

I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me. There you go. you workers of lawlessness. Great gifts in the name of Jesus, void of a life of love, is nothing.

[28 : 17] It's nothing. Jesus has all the gifts possible in total perfection and in love, he laid aside his glory at Christmas to be born in a manger in poverty out of love for his Father and love for us.

He is the greatest gift. And it's in knowing him it isn't walking with him it is being transformed by him that you and I are gifted by him to be instruments of his love and grace and mercy and justice in our communities.

It is only as we are being saturated by that love. Remind the love that accepts you in spite of you.

A love that sought your highest good. He said, I will give myself for you because that is the highest good I can do for you and he did it so that you and I every single day can remember that gift.

Allow that gift that great gift of love to continue to heal us and transform us.

[29 : 41] One last thing. great personal sacrifices minus love equals nothing. You gain nothing and that's verse 3.

If I give if I give away all I have if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love I gain nothing. this is deep. I'm like are you serious? To give away all our possessions to follow Jesus would be extremely difficult for any of us.

Even our missionaries keep something a lot of times. Some of them will have homes here that they rent out while they're gone. Some of them will have investments in their, you know, but he says give up everything.

Everything you got just lay it out there on a bonfire as it were or sell it at a yard sale. Could you give up all your possessions to follow Jesus?

[30 : 48] I am so grateful to Jesus that he doesn't require that of us. I have, I thought about I was sitting there going could I but that's not the gospel.

That's not the good news of the gospel. Give up everything follow me. That's not the gospel.

Because if he, now he, but he did require that of one guy.

You remember him? Mark chapter 10. I love this guy. He's my boy. Mark 10. This, the rich young ruler.

You remember the rich young ruler? I'm just going to try to summarize it as best I can. You know, he comes up to Jesus. Good teacher. What must I do to inherit eternal life? You know, and I mean, he, what must I do?

Because he knows I got to do something to get into heaven. Jesus counters with, why did you call me good? You know, because only good. Then he says to him, do you know the commandments? Do not murder.

[31 : 50] Now listen to this. He gives him the second table of the commandments. The second table is of how we treat one another. Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother. And this guy had the audacity to say, I've done all of that since I was a kid.

What else you got? That's it? I'm in. Sign me up. You know, he, he, no, hold on, watch it. Now Jesus, when he summarizes the law, remember the first and greatest commandment?

The first was love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. What was the second? So what he just gave him is what we would say, love your neighbor as yourself.

That's what he's telling him. How, he said, how's your love life, bro? And he said, my love life is perfect. He thought it was only about his actions, but not his heart.

[33 : 01] Not his mind, his ambitions, his desires, his heart. And in spite of his self-righteousness, the text says that Jesus loved him. Verse 21, looking at him, loved him.

So Jesus loved the self-righteous. Thank you. Thank you. He loved this self-righteous so-and-so that thought he had it all together.

Jesus' heart goes out to him, but that doesn't stop Jesus from telling him the truth. What does he say to him? Okay.

Why don't you do this? I feel you. I feel you, bro. But you lack one thing. Go sell all that you have, give to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven, now come follow me.

Chuck it all. And he was rich. Give it all away. I love you. I love you. Come follow me.

[34 : 08] And he said no because he had great wealth, great riches, great stuff. love. Love. Love. Jesus showed him that he didn't love like he thought he loved.

He didn't love Jesus like he did, like Jesus needed to be loved by him. And I use the word need in a very loose way. He didn't love Jesus.

He didn't love God. God. You see, that's where it begins. The love of God comes to us and blows up in our hearts and minds. The love of God saturates us because the love of God says you are a sinner.

But hey, I sent Christmas for you. In love, I've come for you in Christmas. And you're blown away if you see it and you accept, you realize, oh, I'm in need of God in my life.

I can't do life without him. I need Jesus. And that love of God saturates you and you begin to love God. You grow in your love for God year after year after year.

[35 : 15] You're loving him more. And then, listen, because of that situation, that's when you're able to love your neighbor. It's the love of God that equips us to love our neighbor because, listen, there's not three commandments there.

Love yourself. You already do that quite well. We all do. The problem is we don't love God and we don't love each other very well.

That's why we need Jesus. And that's why Christmas has come. Love came down because we are loveless people. Oh, we, because we bear the image of God, yes, there is love in us.

Yes, yes, I'm not saying there's no love in the world. I'm not saying at all because we bear the image of God. There is love, but that love is flawed and broken and fractured and inconsistent and many times self-centered.

I love you because I feel good about me when I love you. Boy, that's kind of messed up but that's how we do it.

[36 : 28] We love and give because we, we feel good it makes us. It's not about the object, it's about me. So we need Christmas.

And Paul says, well, hold it now, but what if I make the ultimate sacrifice of my life? Suddenly this means I'm okay. I gave my life to be burned.

Later in New Testament history, there will be burnings of Christians that Caesars would burn them as candles. Brothers and sisters, burned to death.

Later, even in European church history, you will find faithful Christians being burned at the stake.

Today, Christians are being martyred in other countries for their faith in Jesus.

But Rev. Kev, I thought the Christian life was all about doing good even to the point of sacrifice.

How is Paul finding fault with this? It's about sacrifice. You've told this before.

[37 : 30] We've heard this before. The Christian life is take up your cross, right? Deny yourself. Sacrifice. These people are doing it. How can Paul, Paul says, without love?

You can do that without love? Freeman, that blows me away because that's what he says. You can give everything, including your life, and still not have love.

Feel right? Can this help for again? We are so selfish that it's possible for us to do something that looks like it is for someone else when it is really for us to enhance our own reputation or fuel or feed our satisfaction in ourselves.

Are we really that selfish? Do you believe that? I hope you do. Hope you believe it. Because it's true.

Yes, we are that selfish. And we, which is why we need Christmas. That's why we need the Christmas love. We won't forgive each other.

[38 : 44] And sometimes, even if we claim to forgive, it's really so that other people will think good of us. You know, you ever hear somebody claim to be humble?

Always amazes me when people say, I'm so humble. I've heard it many times in every church I've ever pastored. There's always somebody who says, I'm so humble. And I always put my head down going, help them, Lord.

It's possible to make great personal sacrifices and have not love in our hearts.

So we need the love of Christmas to come alive in us in a deeper way. Some of us, maybe even for the first time, we need to understand the love of Christmas. Nothing from nothing leaves nothing.

There's an old song that says that. I'm not using the song, just that phrase. Without the love of God in Christmas, you have nothing.

[39 : 50] And so you give nothing. And in the end, you end up with nothing. Our dear sister, Anne Elliot, received Christ's love. She gave Christ's love.

Even when she was hurting the most, she still gave Christ's love. And now she has her received into his loving glory. She has everything.

Is it possible to receive the love of Christ and still have trouble being loving? You know the answer to that question. Yes.

I wish it wasn't so, but it's true. But if you're having trouble, if we're experiencing trouble loving others because we've been so wounded and so hurt, don't live there.

Don't let that be your story. If you are having trouble forgiving, if you're having trouble forgetting, and forgetting, I don't mean brainwashing yourself that it didn't happen.

[40 : 56] That's not what I mean. Not holding it against people. That's what that means, forgetting.

If you're having trouble because you've been so wounded and you're having trouble just reaching out because you were wounded here and now you're here and it's hard to engage people over here because you experience bad things over here, you know what I'm talking about.

Don't live there. Let, cry out to Jesus and give him no rest until he begins to heal your heart with his love.

I have to keep looking at Jesus. I was told this morning by one of my elders, Pastor, keep your eyes on Jesus because when I see Jesus, I see a love that's perfect, a love that heals, a love that accepts, a love that won't let me go in spite of me.

And believe me, I've tried to run. But a love like that, that's the love I have to keep coming back to. And if you have to, just remember Calvary.

If that helps you, I hope it helps you. Just keep your eyes on Calvary. Keep remembering that there is one who is perfect in his love, perfect in all his holiness and righteousness.

[42 : 07] There is one dying for you who is nothing like him. You are imperfect in holiness, imperfect in righteousness. You're like me. You're a mess. And yet that one, that one gives us such great love.

Don't live in your deficit. Live out of his bounty. Live out of his full bank account.

Don't live. Let his love this Christmas. Wash over you again. Meditate on that. Seek his love.

His healing there. And his transformation there. And he will make you able to love others.

And the way he says love. Not the way the culture says love. The way he says. Give. And it shall be given unto you.

[43 : 22] Father, blessed be your name. Thank you for the great love that you have loved us in Christ Jesus. Help us to love.

Teach us to love. Equip us. Fill us with your love. Again and again and again. Fill us. Because we leak. Fill us.

And plug the hole. In Jesus' name. Amen.