

1 John 4:9-11

MW Advent 3, Dec. 20, 2023
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Today, we are considering another Advent Password to open the door to the true meaning of Christmas. And today's password is perhaps the most important one of all: **The Password is "Love."**

One word that the Bible uses a lot that doesn't mean much to us today is the word "manifest." It means "to show clearly." I'd guess that just about the only time we hear that word outside of church is in the freight and shipping industries. Every semitruck on the road carrying freight is required to carry a list of its cargo. That list is called a "manifest." It's called that because it *shows clearly* what is inside the trailer.

That first Christmas, 2000 years ago, was a wonderful moment in the history of the world. It was wonderful because, in that moment, God manifested His love for you and me. In other words, He *showed clearly* exactly what His love was all about. ***"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him."***

It's an amazing love. A love we have trouble understanding, because it's not like any "love" that we feel. I think many a Christian have been troubled on their deathbed, worried that they haven't loved God enough to go to heaven. Of course, that's mistaken thinking. Loving God is the fulfillment of the first table of the Law, so the idea that we can only go to heaven if we love God enough is the same as saying we can only go to heaven if we perfectly keep the commandments. Which of course is wrong.

Rather than thinking about our love for God, let's consider God's love for us. Think about your children when they were very little. You'd get home from work, scoop up that child and begin to play with them. You'd look into their eyes, make faces at them, listen to them babble. No matter how tired you were after a long day of work, the opportunity to spend that time with a baby gives you rest, it refreshes you because you love that child beyond what words can describe. That baby didn't love you very much, though. If your heart were breaking, they wouldn't mind. If you were sick, that wouldn't cause them to lose any sleep. If you died, they might not even notice. Knowing that, would you withhold your love from the child until you were sure they loved you in return? Would you wait for them to do something worthy of your love before you extended your love to them? Of course not! From early on, we love our children, regardless of any loving input on their part. And this is the way it is between us and God, as John writes: ***"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us..."***

And actually, that illustration does a poor job of giving us the real picture of God's love. Because little babies are naturally "loveable." Even seeing a little baby that you have no connection to, you'll naturally feel some sort of love or affection for the child. But when it comes to us, there's *nothing* loveable. And this is certain: God didn't love us humans because we were loveable. In fact, we are the opposite. Paul writes, "***The carnal mind is enmity against God.***" (Romans 8:7)

That means that by nature, we were God's *enemies*, not His friends. Humans don't *love* God by nature—they *hate* Him. They turn away from Him. They do *everything* in their power to disobey His will. If left to themselves, all people would cover themselves in sin and shame, spit in God's face, and do their best to get to hell as quickly as possible. No, we aren't very loveable creatures. And yet God loved us.

When we think of love, we tend to imagine it in the way it's portrayed in fairy tales. A handsome young prince falls in love and marries the beautiful young princess. But God's love isn't like that at all. The Christian author C.S. Lewis once pictured God's love this way: the handsome young prince goes walking among the grimy back alleys of a city slum and finds a dirty old hag sitting in the gutter. She has wasted her life in sin and filth, and she's so ugly that no one wants her anymore. To *this* individual, the prince says, "It is you that I love. Come and be my wife, and share the joys of my kingdom!" That's a much better picture of what God's love for us is like.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, "***God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.***" (Ephesians 2:4-7)

That's the definition of "grace"—"undeserved love." And that's why it's hard for us to understand, because when *you* love someone, there's generally a good reason for it. You're related to them or they've done something kind for you. In His grace, God loves us, although what we *deserve* is the *opposite* of love! He decided to lift us out of the gutter of our sin, and make us His own, and give us the riches of His kingdom!

What an amazing love! And Christmas is the time when that same God *manifests* that love for us. Now is when that love really comes into focus and becomes perfectly clear to us. "***In this love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***"

This is the greatest gift—the most perfect present—that any of us will receive this year. It is the gift of God's Son. And it's not just that little Baby in the manger in Bethlehem, either. . . . Because, after all, we can't just look at the infant Christ. We must look as well at the Savior as

a grown man, suffering on the cross, bearing our sins in agony and shame. He became the “propitiation” for our sins, that is the satisfactory payment, the ransom price. That is how God’s love is truly manifested toward us poor sinners, first in the cradle, but ultimately on the cross! As Paul describes, **“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Romans 5:8)

Here is our *real* reason to rejoice this Christmas. So rejoice! Be merry! God loves you with this amazing love! It’s like a wonderful Christmas gift, all wrapped up with ribbons, just for you. And after describing this gift, John adds a happy footnote: **“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”**

We should love one another. This is different than the mushy sentimentality that we see so much of in the Halmark Christmas specials. Our love for one another isn’t just drummed up affection that lasts for a few weeks around Christmas. It’s true love that flows from our love for God. God’s love for us is the mighty engine that draws our lives along in His service. Our love for one another is the natural result that always follows.

So, **The Password is “Love.”** Let us rejoice this Christmas season in that amazing love of God. Let us rejoice in that love, and be merry in it! Let us celebrate God’s gift of love by sharing that love with others, and by striving for the requirement of love that our Savior Himself gave us: **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** In Jesus’ name. Amen.