

## **Love: The Greatest Virtue Advent 4 December 18 2022 Colossians 3:12-17**

Have you ever thought about what it would have been like to have been a part of the first century church? We often glamourize it, thinking how wonderful it must have been.

But remember, there was only one church per city. If you lived in Colossae and became a Christian, you were a member of the church in Colossae. In Colossae, there wasn't a church for Jewish Baptists and another for Gentile Presbyterians and another for charismatics.

If you didn't like the church or had a falling out with someone in that church, you were stuck. You couldn't jump in your chariot and commute to another church down the road that you liked better. You either had to work out your problems or stop being a Christian. Those were the only options.

Today, Christians who get their feelings hurt just move on to another church. Why go through the effort, the bother, and the pain of working through relational problems? Just go to another church where the people are more loving.

And when you get hurt there, don't worry—there are dozens more churches in the county. You can go for years without ever needing to work through hurt feelings and damaged relationships.

**But if that's the way you choose to deal with relational problems, you'll never learn the reality of practical Christian love.** The truth is, as long as we keep our distance, everything is fine.

It's when we start getting close to one another, someone's going to get stuck! If every time you get stuck and move on, you'll never know the joy of true Christian love.

In the run up to Christmas, it's so easy to become immune to the meaning of familiar Bible verses. Like a vaccine, we sometimes have just enough introduction to a truth from Scripture that we miss the effect it should have on our lives.

Verse 14 in particular that I think fits into this category for many believers, is Love, which is our Advent theme today. **Quote!**

**So much has been said about "Love," people have a tendency to tune out when it's discussed.** They've heard everything they want to hear about it. I hope you won't do that today.

When Jesus was asked what is the most important commandment, how did he reply? **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.**

And the second is like it: **Love your neighbour as yourself."**

Love is shorthand for everything else we could say, about how Christians are to live and behave - **love for God and love for neighbour.**

In Romans 12:9, 10 the apostle Paul writes, *"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves."*

In 1 John 4:20-21 we read, *“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who doesn’t love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.*

*And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”*

In other words, John tells us that the true measure of whether we love God or not, is shown in how well we love our brothers and sisters.

So this Advent 4 morning, I focus on just this one verse in Colossians 3:14, **“And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”**

**What Virtues?** Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love.

**Of all these virtues - Love Is the Chief One.**

This comes as no surprise to us. Paul tells us to **“over all”** put on love. This is the characteristic by which a Christian should be known above all else.

**Verse 14 commands us to love one another.** Boy, how that flies in the face of the way our society understands love, doesn’t it? Society’s view of love is like a Plank Road pothole - you fall into it; it happens to you. You’re not in control.

But that’s not Biblical love. **Biblical love is a command.** And we need it to be a command because the truth is, we much prefer to be selective with our love. We decide who to love and when to love them.

It’s like lots of individual patches sitting there intending to be quilted, but they’re not going to keep you warm if you don’t have the thread to put those patches together to make the quilt that’s going to keep you warm, **and love is that thread.**

You may be seeking to grow in the area of kindness towards someone, or you may be trying to be a little bit more patient with a person you really struggle to love.

But without love, the gong will bang and the cymbal will crash and these attempts will be empty. Maybe that person won’t recognize it and it will be hollow. It takes love to make these things happen and it’s a love that comes through Christ.

That’s why we pray, “May the love of Jesus fill me as the waters fill the sea. Him exalting, self abasing, this is victory.” **“We love because He first loved us.”**

**He loved first and so we love.** Paul’s telling us to do this because he knows we can or else he wouldn’t tell us to do this.

Love is the virtue which unites and holds everything else together in perfect harmony. Continuing with the clothing imagery here, love is like the belt which holds all the other items in place, or love is like the outer garment which is worn over all the rest.

**And so love is not just another virtue to put on along with the others.**

Rather it's the supreme virtue that binds all the other ones together. Or another way to look at it is love is what is common to all these virtues. **It's what unites them.** It's what runs through all of them.

**How are you known by others?** Are you theologically sound? A good speaker? An active member of the church? An involved member of the community? Maybe people know you for the gifts you have.

Maybe you're known as a person with a beautiful voice, or as one who's a talented craftsman, or a person of uncommon wisdom, or one who's experienced God's power in spectacular ways. **But the Lord asks: "do you love?"**

Paul writes to the Corinthians about their relationship with each other when he writes about love.

*If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.*

**Do you see it?** All these experiences, all these abilities, are empty without love being present. I've said it often. This is where the rubber meets the road. **True faith has a practical expression.**

I think all of us are aware that love is supposed to be the predominant characteristic of Christians. **But in practice, how is love exhibited in our lives?**

When you ask someone today to tell you what they think of, when they think of an evangelical Christian, they'll usually respond by describing a political position. Or sometimes they'll talk about all the things we're against!

One commentator makes the statement that the world can do everything the church can do, except for one thing. Our specialty is supposed to be extending love.

**Paul tells us to "put on" love.**

In other words, **"Am I patient, kind, and without envy in my relationships?"** Am I seeking to help those who have a need? Am I desiring the best for those that God has brought into my life?

If we're going to love people, we can't require them to meet certain prerequisites before we love them.

Nobody thinks, understands, and believes exactly as we do. **Love starts where the other person is,** not where we would like them to be.

**We see this trait in Jesus.** He met the fishermen, the tax-collector, the adulterer, the military leader, the worried women, where they were.

He longed to change their lives, but he started this process at the point at which he found each individual. He spoke their language and started with what they could understand. He worked to meet their unique needs.

**Love doesn't demand that everyone be like us.**

It doesn't demand that people have the same experience, the same tastes, the same background. **True love embraces people as they are.**

It means overlooking small irritations. Every one of us has blemishes. There's hardly a day that goes by that we don't do something inappropriate, or foolish.

There's not a day when we don't say something we shouldn't have, or react when we should have shrugged something off.

If we're going to fight about every little irritation in life then we're going to be fighting all the time.

Let me give you an illustration. We're sitting in church and someone walks by us and doesn't acknowledge us! We can be offended at this, or shrug it off and assume that they didn't see us, or were thinking about something else.

**Someone doesn't ask us to help or participate in something.** We can get upset and feel we've been deliberately excluded, or we can conclude that they're not aware of our interest in helping or being involved.

**If we spend our lives looking for offenses we will find them.** Loving people see the irritations in life as bumps in the road heading to spiritual maturity.

They see the beauty, the potential in those around us. They remember that each person is created in the image of God, each one made for a particular purpose.

Learning to love means seeing potential and strengths rather than problems. Learning to build up, rather than tear down.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, a Christian should at all times keep a strong guard against everything that tends to overthrow or corrupt or undermine a spirit of love.

**Love doesn't happen naturally.** Let's remind ourselves over and over, day in and day out, that love is the characteristic that defines our relationships and our dealings with others.

When we see unloving feelings beginning to creep in, stand against them. Eliminate the harmful "buts . . ." from our lives. You know: "he's a nice person but . . ." "He works hard but . . ."; "I like him, but . . ."

**The genuine loving person knows that there are no "buts" about love.**

Paul argues that love is the trait that makes all the other godly traits effective.

But love doesn't only bring the virtues of godliness together . . . **Love brings people together. It unites the body of Christ.**

Patrick Morely writes, "Love is the glue that holds us together and the oil that keeps us from rubbing each other the wrong way.

Love draws people close rather than pushes them away. Love tears down walls of division rather than builds them.

**Love understands rather than condemns.** Love picks up those who have fallen rather than kicks the one who is down. Love causes us to work together rather than competing against each other.

**Jesus tells us that we're to love one another as He has loved us.** Then he tells us that **"by this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another."**

**What is needed most today is the practical outworking of our faith which is seen in our love for each other.** **The greatest way to reach the world is to show them Jesus by the compassion and love we show.** True Christianity has a practical effect.

Even in our hard-hearted world . . . especially in our hard-hearted world, demonstrations of love arrest the attention of the world around us.

The easiest thing in the world this morning is to listen to this message and begin to criticize the way you're being loved. It's easy to see how others are missing the mark.

**But I challenge you to look no further than your own heart.** You cannot change someone else . . . but you can make a change in your own life.

**Every one of us wants to be loved.** We want to be part of what the Bible says the church is to be. But if that is to happen we must recognize that we each have a responsibility to "put on love" in our own lives.

And if we will endeavour to give of ourselves, and reach beyond that which is comfortable and easy, we will find that we will get love in return. And even more importantly: the world will see Jesus as the great Saviour that He truly is.

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love. These are all qualities that Christ demonstrated in his own life.

And Paul is saying if you want to be fully dressed as a Christian, make sure you put all of these on. Clothe yourselves with these Christ-like qualities.

**Love came down at Christmas! Love shall be our token, Love be yours and love be mine;**

**Love to God and others.**