

Love Like God

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, friend. I would like to say Merry Christmas to you. What a wonderful season that around the world, people are acknowledging the birth of the Savior. I have a message I'm going to share with you over the next few minutes that relates to Christmas, but this is not your typical Christmas message. I'm just going to warn you ahead of time, it's going to bless you, and it's going to challenge you. Get ready.

Well, as I said, it is the Christmas season, and oh, how we love Christmas. Now, here in my country, in the United States, we celebrate Christmas traditionally by giving gifts to one another. That stems from recognizing the original gift that was given, which is God's Son. John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave. He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him wouldn't perish but would have everlasting life. Have eternal life."

Now, God gave His Son, but He didn't give Him so that Jesus could come and be a part of some dinner party. He gave His Son to the world. I think often about this. Jesus existed with a Father in eternity passed. Perfect relationship, perfect love, perfect bliss, perfect oneness, and then man who is created in God's image sins. The world is plunged into darkness, and God has a plan to rescue man.

Sin must be judged. Sin has to be atoned for. Rather than the stroke of God's justice and His wrath against sin falling upon us, He sent a substitute. He sent His own Son. It was a mystery. The Bible says no one understood what God was doing. The angels didn't understand. The devil certainly didn't understand. Had he understood, he wouldn't have crucified the Lord of glory. Jesus' own disciples didn't understand why He had come until after the resurrection.

Imagine it, in the throne room in heaven, there's the Father and the Son at His right hand, and They're whispering in hushed tones. And this is my imagination. I just see down this long corridor into the throne room; there's just angels stationed on each side all the way down. There's something different today. There's something different in this moment that they've never sensed before.

There's a solemnness that they've never sensed before. I see the Father and the Son speaking in, as I said, hushed voices. Imagine the angels just flicking a glance at one another across a hallway like, "What's going on? Do you understand?" They don't know. Jesus, I see Him just shaking His head, getting slowly up from the Father's presence, beginning to walk down that corridor. Again, the angels, I just see them, they're standing at attention, and it's just like, "What's going on? What's happening? What's happening?"

Jesus walks down to the end of that corridor. I see these two huge doors. He reaches, puts a hand on one of the doors, and glances back as if to look at the Father one last time, and when He glances back, suddenly He disappears. At that moment, He's conceived in the womb of a virgin named Mary. She's just been visited by the angel, Gabriel. And he tells her, "You're going to give birth to the Son of the Highest," and she says, "Let it be to me, according to your word."

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At that moment, Jesus, who was in heaven, who preexisted with the Father, suddenly is conceived in her womb, and eventually, He's born as a human baby. He's all God, but He's all man. He wasn't born in a palace to the rich and the influential. He was born in a stable. Some say it was a cave that was, a natural cave or something, that was hollowed out from the rock or place where they kept animals. When He was born, He was laid in a feeding trough in a manger.

He was raised by that poor carpenter and His mother in obscurity. Ended up living in Nazareth. Listen, that was, as we say, that's the other side of the tracks. God gave His Son because He so loved us. Think about what He gave Him to, who He gave Him to. Jesus came into this broken, sinful world as one of us.

Then He was taken by cruel hands, by wicked hands, by jealous hands, put through a mock trial, beaten without mercy, and crucified. There on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, God, He laid the sin of the world upon His own Son. And His judgment, His wrath against our sin, was laid upon Jesus, and He died under the weight of our sins. After three days and three nights, the claims of eternal justice were satisfied, and God raised Jesus from the dead.

We will never fully, I don't even think throughout eternity, we will fully understand the depths to which Christ went to redeem us. The Bible says in Isaiah 53, that great redemptive chapter of the Old Testament, that God literally made the soul of Jesus to be an offering for sin. His soul became an offering for our sins.

Jesus talked about Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. We'll never fully know what transpired, and we'll never fully know, truly, the weight and the fullness of what Christ did for us. God so loved the world that He gave His Son. I want to read to you from Romans 5:6. I want you think about this, Romans 5:6-8 NKJV,

⁶ For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Verse 10,

¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

I want you to think about this. When we were without strength, in due time, Christ died for the ungodly. We were without strength, and we were ungodly. We were not like God. We didn't have the strength to fix ourselves. We were without strength. We didn't have the strength to redeem ourselves. We didn't have the strength to fix the problem. We didn't have the strength to cleanse ourselves. We were unable to become like God again. We had become ungodly. When we were ungodly and without the strength to redeem ourselves, to lift ourselves, to fix ourselves, Christ died for us.

It went on, and it says, "That God demonstrated His love towards us while we were still sinners." We were lost in our sin. The wages of sin is death. We were, by nature, the Scripture says, "By

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nature, children of wrath.” Christ died for us. God sent His Son when we were sinners. Then it says, “When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.”

Think about it. We were without strength. We were ungodly. We were sinners, and we were enemies, enemies of God. Sin is an offense to God personally. But more than that, we were enemies of God because we were at war with Him fighting over the lordship of our own lives. We’re determined we’re going to live it our way. We’re going to be the master and commander of our own lives. When we were created to worship God, we were created to submit to God, to walk with God, to love God.

Humanity decided no. It’s all the way back in the garden when the serpent tempted Eve and tempted Adam, who was with her. Says, “Hey, if you partake of this tree, the knowledge of good and evil, well, you’ll be like God. You can decide for yourself what’s good and evil. You can decide for yourself what’s right and wrong. Who says that God can set parameters for your life? Who says that He has the right to tell you what’s right and what’s wrong? Who says that He can set up fences and barriers for you?”

Now, God claimed exclusive right to that tree. He said, “Adam, Eve, if you ever violate this one thing, this is the only thing I claim exclusive rights to. I give you the world. I give you everything else. Rule in it. Reign in it. Be fruitful, multiply, enjoy it, but I’m your Creator. And I alone have the wisdom and have the heart to know good from evil, right from wrong. That’s something that I alone will make the call on.” Adam decided, “No, I’m going to be like God myself. I’m going to decide for myself what’s right and wrong.” It’s been the problem ever since. Human beings have fought God. Have warred with God, said, “No, I’m going to be my own Lord.”

Well, friend, when we come to Christ, we must believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead and confess Him with our lips as Lord. Lord means “boss,” it means “master.” Jesus died for us when we were God’s enemies. In that, we’re fighting, at war with God, over the lordship of our own lives. Quite an interesting thought. Let me read a couple of other verses to you, and then I want to share a few thoughts and illustrations. 2 Corinthians 5:19, this is from the amplified classic Bible. It says that,

¹⁹ It was God [personally present] in Christ, reconciling and restoring the world to favor with Himself, not counting up and holding against [men] their trespasses [but cancelling them].

I love it. “God was personally present in Christ, reconciling and restoring the world to favor with Himself, not holding against men their trespasses, but canceling them.” I want you to think about it. Keep these thoughts in your mind because I’ve got somewhere that I want to go with this.

Again, this is our Christmas season, and we give gifts to one another. Well, God gave us the ultimate gift. He gave us His Son. But He gave us His Son when we were enemies, when we were without strength, when we were ungodly, when we were sinners. He canceled our sin. He didn’t hold our sin against us. Let me read to you from Ephesians 4. This is verse 32 NJKV. It says,

³² And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Now think about it. God forgave us when we were ungodly. He forgave us when we were sinners. He forgave us when we were without strength. He forgave us when we were enemies,

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when we did not deserve it. Here it says, “Be kind, tenderhearted. You forgive like you’ve been forgiven.” It goes right into chapter 5 in Ephesians, the very next verses, verses 1-2 NKJV.

¹ Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. ² And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

Now, it starts. It says, “Be imitators of God as dear children.” Children imitate their parents. We had a celebration at our house yesterday. Kids were over. Grandkids, some of them, some of them weren’t able to be there. They’re actually out of state at the moment, but one of the grandsons was there. Our little grandson, Liam, he calls me Papa. I was teasing him, and he was saying back to me everything I was saying to him. He was imitating his grandfather. Well, grandkids imitate their grandparents. Children imitate their parents.

I remember when our eldest son, Harrison, was just a little boy. He was in a car seat. He was probably, I don’t know, two years old. I don’t mean to be crude, but I want to illustrate a point. It’s just me and Harrison in the car. I roll the window down, and I spit out the window, roll the window back up, and I look over, and Harrison is looking at me, and he’s studying me. He turned around, and he went, and he spit just like Daddy. Only his window wasn’t rolled down. There was spit all over the window. Well, it struck me at that moment, the kid’s imitating me. I better watch how I act, how I talk, and what I do.

The Scripture tells us to be tenderhearted, to forgive, and to love like we have been loved, to imitate God, to love like God loves. I realize that’s a pretty tall order. Listen to these words from Jesus in John 13:34-35 NKJV. He said,

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Now, He didn’t just tell us to love one another, but He said we’re to love as He has loved. We’re to love with the same kind of love. Now, putting that in the context of what we’re talking about, God so loved the world. This is the Christmas story. That He gave His Son, He forgave us. He canceled our debt, but He did it when we were enemies, when we didn’t deserve it, when we were without strength. We didn’t have the ability to change ourselves. God loved us when we didn’t deserve it.

We need to do the same for others. That’s your Christmas thought. I want you to stay with me. We don’t need to be looking for revenge or secretly rejoicing when someone we don’t like falls. We need to show the world what God is really like. There was an old preacher that we had in the church many, many years ago. I’m not quite sure, but I would suspect that he’s been in heaven for a few years now. If not, he would be close to 100 years old, maybe older than that. He might even be 110 by now.

He shared this story, and as far as I can figure, this would’ve been the late 1930s. He was in Arizona. I don’t know how it all transpired, but he ended up with an Apache enclave out in a little area. There was a village in a remote, almost off-the-grid area. He said that they didn’t even have electricity there. And how he found himself out there, I’m not sure, but he said, “I couldn’t even drive my truck all the way there. I had to park the truck, and then I had to hike to get to where this settlement of Apaches was.”

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He says, "And I found them," says, "I went to preach the gospel to them." He says, "But no one spoke English, or at least they didn't let on that they spoke English." He said, "I finally found a, it was, I think, a 10-year-old boy, and he was drunk. Ten years old and drunk, but he spoke English." He said, "He became my interpreter. And I used this 10-year-old boy, who'd obviously been drinking, to tell the people what I was there for."

In rudimentary terms, he said, "Yes, I shared the gospel with them. I told them that God loved us so much that He gave His Son to cancel our sins. And that He changes us and puts that love nature inside of us." He said, "I would go back there, and I would use the little boy." He went back for the next year, I think it was, and just shared the gospel. Shared the gospel with them. He said, "They were the rudest people that I had ever met." He said, "It seemed like they went out of their way to be unkind to me." He said, "They would turn their backs on me. They treated me just horribly."

He said, "But I felt like God wanted me to be there." He says, "When I would walk out, I would stand next to my truck. Sometimes I'd drive away, and then I'd park." He says, "I would cry." I said, "God, I don't want to go back there. Those people are mean. They're evil. They're harsh, and they're rude to me." He says, "And God would say to my heart, son, you pour your heart out to Me, but never let them see you this way." He said, "You pour out your heart to Me, and I'll minister to your heart. I'll heal you, but you keep going back, and you show them the love of Christ." He would go back there, I think, at least weekly for a year.

He would go in there and share the love of Christ. No response, no response. He said they were just mean and cruel. It may have been less than a year; it might have been nine months, something like that. He said, "One day, the little boys said, 'They are having a council meeting, and you're invited in.'" He says, "Really?" It was so unusual because he was never invited to anything. He was shunned. And, again, people went out of their way to be cruel to him.

He said, "I came under what was like an old tattered tent, no electricity under there, and they had a fire going under there. They just had stumps of wood that people sat on. They indicated for me to sit on the stump. The leader, the chief, suddenly pointed at me and started speaking in Apache." He said, "I didn't understand what he was saying." He says, "And then he started to cry, and he got on his knees. Then someone else pointed at me, and I didn't understand what they were saying. They got on their knees." And he said, "People all over that tent, they were crying." He says, "I asked the little interpreter." He says, "What's happening?"

He said, "Well, you didn't know it, and I was not allowed to tell you. But when you came, and you told them about Jesus. And that God loved us so much that He gave His Son. And that He's poured out love like that in our hearts, and we can love that way." They said, "It's the biggest lie they've ever heard." Our whole village, this group of people, says, "We all agreed together to test you. Everyone for the last, whatever, nine months, ten months, everyone has gone out of their way to be cruel to you and to be rude to you because they said it's not possible that someone could love like you say."

He said, "But after all these months, you've been kind. You've loved us despite the way that we've treated you. The chief says that your message is true, and he accepts it. And he has opened his heart to this God that you speak about." I think almost everyone there gave their lives to Christ, including the little boy who ended up becoming a traveling preacher, by the way. What was it that broke through? It was the love of Christ.

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Let this Christmas be a time of the restoration of broken relationships, as God restored the broken relationship with mankind. Maybe there's some relationships that you can love in the same way Christ has loved you and see that relationship restored. I love the book of Philemon. There's only one chapter in it. You want a short New Testament chapter to read? That short New Testament book is the book of Philemon.

Philemon, he was a wealthy Christian. Had a church in his home, and he had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus, apparently from what we read in the Scripture, robbed Philemon. Stole from him, and then ran away to get lost amongst the throngs of Rome, ran away to the city of Rome. Something went wrong. Onesimus apparently got arrested, got put in jail, and guess who his cellmate was? The apostle Paul.

Paul refers to it in the book of Philemon. He calls Onesimus, "My son, whom I begotten while in my chains." Paul leads Onesimus to Christ there in prison. Paul goes on, talks about it, and said, "He's my own heart." He says, "Before, he was unprofitable to you, but now he's going to be profitable." It's interesting. The name Onesimus means "profitable." Paul's making a play on his name, says, "Look, he was unprofitable to you, but now he's going to live up to his name." Paul actually sent Onesimus to Philemon with the letter of Philemon that's in our Bible.

Imagine Onesimus showing up at the door, and Philemon says, "What are you doing here? You robbed me. You ran off." Onesimus says, "Here, this is from Paul." He starts reading the letter, and Paul says, "I want you to forgive him, and if he owes anything, I'll pay that." He said, "But I just want to remind you, you owe me your very life, Philemon." Very interesting. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was restored.

Paul was asking Philemon to love like God loved him. "Philemon, your sins have been forgiven. You've been loved by God. Now, I want you to extend that love to Onesimus. He was unprofitable before, but if you love him, he's going to be profitable." Philemon did forgive him and did love him. You know what? History tells us that Onesimus became the bishop of the church at Ephesus. He was loved into greatness. You can love people into greatness, my friend. You can.

I was an assistant pastor for a couple of years at a small church. And the pastor had invited a guy, he was involved in the rock and roll world, pretty famous, to come to the church, and he'd accepted the invitation. We were really excited. We've invited the whole community to come out, and we've printed up flyers that so-and-so is going to come, and he's going to share his testimony. We're excited. We've got a bunch of other churches involved.

And the day before the meeting's going to take place, this guy calls up, and he says, "By the way, how big is your church?" We told him, "On a good Sunday, it probably ran 120." He says, "I'm not coming. You're too small." That was it. Hung up the phone. Me, and another guy actually had to cover. We did some tag team preaching instead of him. People came out, they were disappointed.

We put flyers all over town, and it angered me inwardly, made me mad. I said some very unkind things about this guy. Shouldn't have said them, but I did. It was just sticking in me. The pastor said, "Bayless, you need to forgive him." He said, "He'll grow. He's just immature. He'll grow. Let's give him some grace. Let's forgive him." I said, "You're right." I did forgive him.

I really learned a lesson watching the pastor and how he loved. Even though he was put in a hard position, had to get up and backpedal in front of everybody, "Sorry that we advertised.

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It's not happening." He just said he couldn't come. He didn't say, "Ah, that rat bailed out on us at the last minute." He didn't do that.

I really learned a lesson. Years later, now, interesting, that guy carried on in the same way, by the way, this rock and roll guy now "become Christian." He carried on with that same arrogant attitude. He lost all of his money, he lost his health, and he lost his marriage. Hit rock bottom. We all heard about it. It was a sad thing. Anyway, years later, after he's gone through all this, I'm attending a meeting, and he's there doing the special music. He's been restored. He's repented. He's changed his heart, and he just shared a little bit from the platform.

He says, "I used to be such and such way." He said, "I was arrogant. I wouldn't go to meetings if it was a little church," or whatever he says. He said, "I've repented, and I've humbled myself before God, and I'm just so grateful to go anywhere that Jesus would send me." I was astonished seeing him, that he had grown in grace, that he had matured spiritually. I feel like that pastor's love, it helped him grow in Christ's likeness. I just want to tell you, friend, the love of God has been poured out in your heart, and it has been poured out in my heart.

We can love as we have been loved. God so loved the world that He gave, His only begotten Son, so that we could be redeemed. So that same love could be poured into our hearts. Let this be the hallmark of this Christmas for you. That you love the unlovely, that you love the undeserving, that you love the unworthy, that you love your enemies, that you do good to those that persecute you, that you bless those that curse you.

Now, it's one thing trusting a person; it's another thing forgiving a person. Forgiveness, it is unearned. It's a gift that's given. Of course, trust has to be earned, we don't want to mix up the two, but you can love. You don't want to let bitterness get a hold of your heart. Bitterness is like acid. It does more damage to the vessel in which it's stored than it does to the object upon which it's poured. Don't become a cynical believer. Love like God loves. I want to tell you, friend, Jesus loves you. God bless you.

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