

The Heart of Christmas: Love

Galatians 4:4-5; Ephesians 1:3-14; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Just a few days ago, many of us woke up to Christmas morning. You got out of bed, made your way to the tree, and there they were—the gifts. Each box, different in size, shape, and weight, quietly invited curiosity. Before a single package was opened, the mystery alone stirred joy in the heart. As the paper was torn away and ribbons were tossed aside, gift by gift was revealed—and with each one came a different reaction. Some gifts were practical and appreciated: warm socks, gloves, scarves, or a winter jacket—things that will serve us well on cold nights ahead. Others weren't a surprise at all but still brought a smile—like opening the new fridge and admiring all that shelf space or sinking into a new couch that no longer sags toward the floor. And then there were the gifts we didn't really need but deeply wanted. The wireless earbuds, the new smartphone, gourmet chocolates, a surround-sound television—or maybe even the promise of a long-dreamed-of trip to somewhere warm and beautiful. Standing back and looking at the opened packages beneath the tree, it was hard not to feel overwhelmed by the abundance of blessings.

But as wonderful as some of those gifts were, you must admit—not every gift was a good one. Some were... well... truly hideous. There was the sweater—three sizes too large—with a reindeer on it wearing a Christmas hat. You wore it once, just long enough to protect the giver's feelings, and then quietly retired it forever. Or perhaps you remember opening a rocking Santa Claus—sunglasses on, electric guitar in hand—which seemed amusing at first, until it began playing the same annoying Christmas tune repeatedly... and wouldn't shut off.

And then there was that Christmas, when you were just a child and all you wanted was a remote-control car. Your parents saved it for last, knowing full well that every other gift would be forgotten the moment you opened it. Batteries were installed, excitement was at its peak, and you sent that car flying across the room—until it hit the very first wall. Boom. It fell apart instantly, never to run again. And of course, who could forget the tie you'd never wear... or the used set of golf clubs held together with tape—when you don't even like golf. These were the kinds of gifts so bad you would never dream of re-gifting them. That would be embarrassing... and possibly cruel.

As I've been listing those bad gifts, I'm sure some of you have been quietly objecting. After all, we are not all the same. Our tastes differ, our interests vary, and what one person considers useless, another may treasure deeply. One person's disappointment really can be someone else's delight. But that raises an important question. What if you were given the task of choosing just one gift to give to every person in the world? Is there anything you could buy that would be welcomed by all? Something practical, deeply satisfying, and so meaningful that it would be cherished—not just on Christmas morning, but every day for the rest of life? Humanly speaking, such a gift seems impossible. Yet this is exactly what God has done. He did not give us something temporary or disposable. He gave us His one and only Son—born among us, living

for us, and dying for us—so that we might be redeemed and welcomed into His family. Today, we are going to consider this perfect gift of love—why God gave it, what it means for us, and how we are called not merely to receive it, but to share it with the world.

Love Sent: God’s Love Entered our World

To truly grasp the greatness of God’s gift, we must first understand the world into which that gift was sent. It was a time when Pax Romana—the “peace of Rome”—stretched across much of the known world.¹ This peace was achieved through military dominance, an expansive system of roads, and thriving trade routes that connected distant regions. Rome even absorbed the gods of conquered peoples, promoting unity through shared worship and loyalty to the empire. So successful did Rome appear in securing order that its emperor, Augustus, was celebrated as a savior and honored with the title “Son of God.”² Yet beneath this outward stability, the world remained deeply broken. Scripture reminds us that our struggle is not merely political or human, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

Pax Romana enforced loyalty, demanded honor toward the emperor, and normalized the worship of many gods. But darkness is not found only in violence and oppression—it is also found wherever hearts give allegiance to anyone or anything other than the one true Creator. Rome’s peace could restrain chaos, but it could never redeem the soul. Out of grace and mercy, our Father who is in heaven sent a great Light into this world.

For centuries, angels and prophets searched and inquired carefully into this salvation—longing to see what God was preparing (1 Peter 1:10–12). What they glimpsed from afar would now unfold before human eyes: the fulfillment of an ancient plan, established before the foundation of the world—the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 13:8). Apostle Paul tells us that, at just the right moment, God sent His Son from heaven, born of a woman and born under the law (Galatians 4:4). This was the arrival of the long-awaited conflict first announced in Genesis 3:15—the promised seed of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head.³ As foretold by the prophet Isaiah, our royal Champion was born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) and entered fully into life under the law. He did so not to escape its demands, but to fulfill them—to bear its curse on

¹ James Montgomery Boice, [“Galatians,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 472.

² David Seal, [“Son of God,”](#) in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ R. Alan Cole, [Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 9, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 161.

behalf of His people.⁴ Without exception, Christ perfectly kept the moral, ceremonial, and civil requirements of the law, fully exhausting its righteous demands—the full penalty of our whole race’s violation of it.

At the cross, our true Kinsman-Redeemer stood in our place. Jesus bore the full weight of God’s righteous wrath against sin, broke the chains of our captivity, and reconciled us to God. Through His sacrifice, we are not merely forgiven—we are welcomed, redeemed, and offered adoption as sons and daughters of the living God.

Love Secured: God’s Love Seals and Keeps Us

Having seen how God sent His Son into the world, we now turn to the beautiful truth that this love was not only revealed in history—but secured in eternity. I’ll admit, I’m not much of a shopper. If I can buy something online, I will—hoping, of course, that the “beautiful picture” on the screen matches what shows up at the door. And when I do find myself wandering through a shopping mall, I’m what you might call a window shopper. I don’t usually have a plan. I simply look around until something catches my eye—preferably with a bright red “On Sale” sign attached. It’s rarely a long visit, and even more rarely do I walk away feeling like I truly got my money’s worth. Often, buyer’s regret becomes my new middle name.

God’s gift of sending Christ was not an afterthought. Apostle Paul tells us that our salvation was planned before the foundation of the world—a truth that echoes throughout Ephesians 1:3–14. God knew that creating us in His image meant granting us genuine moral responsibility. With that responsibility came real choice. With that responsibility came the tragic reality of sin—falling short of His glory and earning its wages, which Scripture plainly tells us is death (Romans 3:23; 6:23). As theologian James Montgomery Boice rightly observed, humanity has become so entangled by sin that we are “no longer capable of making even the smallest movement back toward God unless God first reaches down and performs the miracle of the new birth.”⁵ Left to ourselves, we would never choose God—but in grace, God chooses to act.

Paul tells us that out of sheer grace, God elects those who are in Christ to be holy and blameless before Him (1:4) and lovingly adopts them as sons and daughters into His family (1:5). The Augustinian theologians captured this truth well when they said, “Christ died sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect alone.”⁶ While this may challenge our human sense of fairness, Scripture assures us that the God who elects is also perfectly just. Though we

⁴ Scot McKnight, [Galatians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 204.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, [Ephesians: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 16.

⁶ Archibald Alexander Hodge, [“The Consensus of the Reformed Confessions.”](#) *The Presbyterian Review* V, no. 17–20 (1884): 297.

may not know why God chooses as He does, we can rest confidently in who He is—holy, wise, and good in all His ways.⁷

What the Father planned in eternity, the Son faithfully carried out in history. Under Jewish law, when a person lost property through debt or hardship, God provided a means of restoration: a close relative—the Kinsman-Redeemer—could step in, pay the price, and restore what had been lost to the family.⁸ That picture prepares us to understand what Christ has done for us. Apostle Peter explains it this way:

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

— 1 Peter 1:18–19

Jesus is our true Kinsman-Redeemer. He did not purchase our freedom with money that fades, but with His own precious blood. As Paul reminds us, “You were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Our redemption is complete and final—we are no longer slaves to sin, never to be sold back under its power again.⁹

And this redemption serves a far greater purpose. God’s plan, Paul tells us, is “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:10). What was lost through Adam’s fall is restored through Christ’s obedience.¹⁰ This does not mean that all will be universally saved, but that all whom God has elected are fully redeemed—forgiven, adopted into His family, and transformed to live holy lives under the gracious reign of their Redeemer.

What the Son accomplished once for all at the cross is now personally and powerfully applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit. Salvation is not merely something Christ secured in history; it is something the Spirit now makes real and certain in the believer’s life.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, [*Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 17.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, [*Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 22.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, [*Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 23.

¹⁰ Tony Merida, [*Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 29.

“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”

— Ephesians 1:13-14

Unlike the gifts we exchange at Christmas—gifts that wear out, break down, or quickly lose their shine—God’s gift of salvation never expires. It is eternally sealed by the Holy Spirit Himself. In biblical times, a seal served three vital purposes: it authenticated what was true, it marked ownership, and it secured what was valuable.¹¹ When Paul says we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, he is declaring that our salvation is genuine, that we belong to God, and that our future is eternally safe in His hands.

The Holy Spirit is not only the seal but also the deposit—the divine guarantee—that when we one day stand before God, we will be presented by Christ as holy and as His beloved children (Romans 8:16).¹² Our salvation does not rest on our performance but on God’s promise. And this sealing is not only about the future; it is a present reality. The Spirit walks with us now as our Advocate, convicting the world of its rejection of God, strengthening our faith, and faithfully guiding us into all truth (John 16:7–15).

Here, then, is the glorious gift from our Creator: God the Father chose us, God the Son redeemed us, and God the Spirit has sealed us. From beginning to end, salvation is the work of God alone. Praise be to God—amen.

Love Defined: God’s Love Shapes How We Live

The love God has so graciously given to us in Christ was never meant to stop with us—it was meant to be shared. That is why apostle Paul reminds us that without love, even our greatest efforts amount to nothing. He writes:

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

¹¹ James Montgomery Boice, [Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 31–32.

¹² Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Ephesians](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 30.

Paul's words from this well-known chapter confront our tendency toward self-centered spirituality¹³—a form of faith that prizes gifting, visibility, and outward displays of maturity over humble, self-giving love.¹⁴ The cross of Christ stands as God's ultimate definition of love: not performance, but surrender; not display, but sacrifice. The love Christ demonstrated for us is not a gift to be admired from a distance—it is a gift meant to be shared. Even if we could understand all divine mysteries, perform great acts of faith, or meet every physical need around us, Paul reminds us that without love, these acts gain us nothing. As David E. Garland rightly observes, “One can put on a show of love without having love, but one who truly has love cannot help but show it.”¹⁵

After warning us that even the greatest gifts are empty without love, Paul paints a picture of the kind of love that should shape every part of our lives.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

When Paul gives us fifteen verbs in just a few sentences, we cannot escape the conclusion that love is dynamic and active, not static or sentimental.¹⁶ Biblical love is not merely a feeling we experience or kind words we speak as platitudes¹⁷—it is love lived out in patience, humility, endurance, and truth. And though we rejoice that we have been born again—that the old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)—we must also humbly admit that, like the Corinthians, these words still confront us. Too often we are unkind, quick to envy, tempted toward pride, and prone to keep careful records of wrongs done against us. How we must pray for grace to be patient in suffering, to endure injury without retaliation, and to love when it costs us something. What would our world look like if we refused to hold the evil of others against them, choosing instead to leave room for God's righteous wrath and to overcome evil with good

¹³ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 608.

¹⁴ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 608.

¹⁵ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 610.

¹⁶ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 616.

¹⁷ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 616.

(Romans 12:19–21)? Having received such love from God in Christ, may we now, by the power of the Spirit, truly love one another.

Conclusion

As we come to the close of this message, we are brought back to the image we began with—standing before a tree filled with gifts. Some gifts delight us for a moment, some disappoint us, and others eventually wear out, break down, or are forgotten altogether. But the gift God has given us in Christ is unlike any gift we have ever received. It does not expire, it does not disappoint, and it never loses its power.

God sent His love into a broken world through His Son, and He secured that love through the finished work of the cross and the sealing presence of the Holy Spirit. And now, God defines that love in our lives—not as sentiment, but as sacrifice, not as words alone, but as a life shaped by patience, kindness, humility, truth, and endurance. The love we celebrate at Christmas is not merely something to admire—it is something to receive, to rest in, and to reflect.

Perhaps today you realize that you have admired the gift without ever truly receiving it. Christ was born, lived, died, and rose again so that you might be redeemed, forgiven, and adopted into God’s family. That invitation still stands. And for those who have received this gift, the call is just as clear: the love that saved us must now shape us. We are sent into a watching world—not to win arguments, but to display Christ; not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good; not to live for ourselves, but to love as we have been loved.

So, this Christmas, may we rejoice in the greatest gift ever given. May we rest in the love God has sent, trust the love He has secured, and live out the love He has defined. And as we do, may our lives point others—not to ourselves—but to Jesus Christ, the true gift of Christmas.

May our lives this Christmas preach the gospel we celebrate. To Him be the glory, now and forever. Amen