As we continue in our journey in the season of advent, let’s do a quick review, a recap of what Advent is. Advent comes from a Latin word meaning “coming.” It is a season of celebration for the coming of Christ and the coming again of Christ—a time of anticipation and preparation, a time of expectant waiting. We have already lit the candles of hope and peace. And today we have lit the candle of love. It is the candle of His love that was manifested as a baby in a manger. He entered into our world to reconcile us to His Father, to redeem mankind. He descended into a world of darkness and pain, of sin and shame, to establish an eternal Kingdom. We view the nativity through the lens of Calvary—an empty cross, an empty tomb, and an occupied throne. Christmas reminds us that God came to us, came for us, and dwells with us—Emmanuel. And the reason is this: HE LOVES YOU! You and I need a savior, and because He loves us, with a love complete, all consuming, and beyond comprehension, God sent His only begotten Son to be sacrificed and to die on our behalf. You and I are loved. How does that truth impact our lives? What will we do with this gift of love?

 In our reading in the Gospel of John, we read of a conversation Jesus has with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Jesus is sharing His purpose with Nicodemus (3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”). Please don’t let the familiarity of this verse cause you to miss the truth and the impact of the greatest gift that mankind will ever know. For God so loved, He gave. Family! Listen! You are the object of that love. It’s not reserved for the elite or the “put-together.” No, Christian. Your identity is simply this: You are LOVED! You don’t have to convince God to love you. And family, to truly experience this love changes everything about us. This love demands a response. Our chief end as the redeemed, adopted children of God is to glorify God and make Him known—loving and operating in the spirit of Christmas and Easter year around.

 How do we respond to Christ’s love? John 13:34-35 tells us, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Loving others is a characteristic of the Christian; it is evidence of our love for Christ. In our active waiting, we are to love one another. Love gives, love sacrifices, and love swallows pride. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (see also Matthew 22:36-40\*). The words “love your neighbor as yourself” were commanded by someone whose neighbors sought to kill Him. Eight times in scripture this commandment is given. And in no instance is there an “exception” clause (John 4:7-14\*\*). God equips us to love because He is the source. We are invited to love and be loved. He equips us to show His grace, His forgiveness, and His hospitality. As Paul says in Philippians 2:13, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” He has given us His Spirit.

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\* Matthew 22:36-40

36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” 37 Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

\*\*John 4:7-14

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” 11 “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” 13 Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

This wisdom shines as the fullness of biblical knowledge. In Galatians 5, Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit (vs. 22-23). Love is listed *first* because love encompasses the others. Our response to God’s love should be that of Mary to the angel of God, recorded in Luke 1:38—“I am the Lord’s, may it be done according to your word.” In this love, in this doing according to the Lord’s word, we must pray for those for whom we have difficulty loving. We must pray that God works in our hearts to engender love, the ultimate freedom. To experience freedom is to experience the fullness of His love. Paul Washer has said, “God is not a God who simply tolerates you. He is the God who loves you, the God who desires you.” The object of His love is who you are! Consult your loving Father before you consult your feelings. How important is your appealing to your loving Father? How essential is the Love of God in Christ? This moment in the history of theological study may confirm that it is central to all that is Christian:

Late in his life, eminent theologian Karl Barth delivered guest lectures at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The president of the seminary realized that Barth was tired and perhaps ill, and so rather than proceed with the typical question-and-answer period after Barth’s last lecture, he took the podium and, on behalf of all present asked this single question: Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?”

Poised to write down Barth’s response, students and faculty alike watched as Barth thought a moment and then offered this wondrous response: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

In the active waiting and active preparing of Advent, we remind ourselves that we are loved. And because of that truth, we must respond! Our response is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our minds, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We must allow the Holy Spirit to turn our hearts into

sanctuaries of love (Titus 3:4-6\*). This Christmas, we should be intentional about sharing the only necessary thing, Jesus Christ. We have been equipped to love others. And we should share the truth of this loving Jesus that we know (1John 4:16\*\*). Understanding and meditating upon the depths of Christ’s love for us causes our love for others to look different. Love costs. It is sacrificial. Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus, “Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave up Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Ephesians 5:1-2). In Advent, we must actively prepare by walking in the love of Christ and then displaying that love to others. This advent, maybe it is time to forgive or to be forgiven, to mend relationships, to express regret. And remember, Family, the chief end of the Christian life is to glorify God. His love is personal—for you and to you. Love God and love others because you are loved. “For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” And that love demands a response! What will our response be?

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\*Titus 3:4-6

4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior,

\*\*1John 4:16

16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

Passages in support of this message:

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

John 3:14-17

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.