

Goal: That the hearers more live the love of God with each other and in Him.

There's an old story about a very successful fisherman. Each morning he'd take his small boat out on the lake and within a few hours he'd return with a boat filled with fish. People wondered, how he did it? One day a stranger showed up and asked the man if he could go along the next time he went fishing. "*Sure. Meet me here tomorrow at 5:00 and we will go out.*" The next morning the two of them made their way through the early morning mist to a small cove where the fisherman stopped the boat. The stranger wondered where the man's equipment was. He had no rod or reel. All the stranger saw was a small net and a rusty tackle box.

The man pulled the tackle box over to himself, opened it, and took out a red stick of dynamite. Taking a match, he lit the fuse, held it for a moment and threw it into the water. After the explosion, he netted up the fish and filled his boat. After watching this, the stranger reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, flashing the badge of a game warden. "*You're under arrest.*" But this didn't rattle the fisherman. He reached into the tackle box, pulled out another stick of dynamite, lit it, held it while the fuse burned down, and then handed it to the game warden. "*Now,*" he said, "*Are you just going to sit there or are you going to fish?*"

That's the question God poses for us today. "*Are you going to sit there or are you going to fish?*" Or in terms we use, are you going to go love others and make disciples or not? Jesus says, "***I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.***" (John 15: 5, 8) Basically, we are disciples of Jesus, beloved by God, so go produce fruit. John encourages us, "***But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.***" (1 John 3:18) Don't just talk the talk, you need to walk the walk. In other words, anybody can say, "*I love you.*" Words are cheap. It's the action that counts.

Each morning as I drive to school I listen to KRTR 96.3, and for the past couple of months they've been playing a game called the I love you game. Throughout the morning, each of the personalities takes turns calling businesses, asking questions or seeking guidance, then saying things like, "*Thank you so much, I love you*" or "*You're the best, love you.*" hoping the person on the other end of the line would respond with "*I love you too.*" But rarely does anyone respond with those words. Why is that? Words are cheap. It's not enough to just say it, we need to show it.

So, are you going to sit there or are you going to fish?" Are you just going to say that you love others or are you going to actually do something about it? So this morning let's look at the three characteristics of Christian love that the Apostle outlines this morning to know if our love is genuine Christian love.

The first and most important characteristic of Christian love is that it is always in response to God's love for us. John links our ability to love to our faith in Jesus, which is an important contrast to our world today. It's become popular to emphasize the importance of self-love, thinking that we can't love others if we don't love ourselves. Now, while there is some truth to that, but there's also a danger. What is it that makes you so lovable? What makes me so lovable? Is it my sparkling personality? Is it your moral code or your giving spirit? If you say, "Yes", you don't understand the real nature of humanity. You don't understand just how deep and corrupted sin is. Deep within the hearts of every person is the potential for unspeakable evil. That is the one lesson of all history. If people could look into our hearts, we'd see that we are all unlovable. There is only one way that we can truly love ourselves. ***"We love because He first loved us."*** (1 John 4: 19)

We can't understand what real love is until we see the suffering Christ laying down His life to redeem us. The Greek word that God uses to express His love is "agape," life-giving, self-sacrificing love for another. If we understand the cross and the wonderful love that is expressed there, then we can honestly understand how amazing it is that in spite of our unworthiness, the God of all creation loves us each as his own children. That's what gives us the ability to love ourselves as well as our ability to love others.

Second, Christian love acts by always doing what God's commands. Several times in this passage the writer admonishes us to ***"keep His commands."*** (1 John 3:24) This is an important aspect of Christian love.

Today, there is a lot of talk about love, but little about keeping God's commands, although the two are intimately connected. And do you know what happens when you separate Christian love from God's commands? In the 60s and 70s it was fashionable for people to embrace what was known as Situational Ethics. In a nutshell, there's no absolute right or wrong in life. The only way to know what is right or wrong in any given situation is to apply the rule of love. You always have to ask, what's the loving thing to do? Working from this philosophy many ethicists concluded that there might be times when adultery was right or lying was right or even murder was right because somehow at the time it was "the loving thing to do." So, Situational Ethics became a way for a person to rationalize any situation and turn any action into a loving action.

The most outrageous example of this occurred with the Charles Manson family. A few of you may remember the awful murder of actress Sharon Tate in 1969. When Susan Atkins, was asked about her rationale behind the killing, she smiled and said, “*You have to have a real love in your heart to do this for people.*” It’s a horrific example, but the principle is sound. Be careful if anybody tries to tell you that something is the loving thing to do if it conflicts with God’s commandments. Jesus didn’t say that the commandment to love makes all the rest obsolete. What he said is that all the law and prophets depend on a love for God and a love for each other. And John tells us that a love for God is to keep His commandments. Christian love always keeps God's commands.

Third and finally, Christian love is always concerned about the needs of others. The point is that there is no love for God that isn’t connected to a love for others. The self-righteous, self-centered, *Lone Ranger* kind of Christian is really no Christian at all. There isn’t any creature more repulsive to God than the self-seeking saint who prides themselves on their goodness and religiosity and turns a nose up at the next-door neighbor or at the next person in the pew.

Consider Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees. It wasn’t the Jewish faith that offended Jesus. He was a Jew. It was those who used religion to elevate themselves by tearing others down that He condemned. But, equally as offensive, were those nice, sweet Christians who have good intentions about serving the world but never get into action. Consider the poor of this world. A major portion of the world's wealth is concentrated in what are called Christian nations. What better plan could God have for meeting the needs of the unfortunate of this world than have his people to share their abundance?

A Christian woman was visiting Ethiopia, a land known for suffering and despair. She saw small children with the swollen bellies of malnutrition. She saw the diseased and dying from the ravages of drought. She felt like screaming out at God. But then she realized that God was screaming out at her. We are God's plan for caring for the unfortunate of this world! Are we going to sit there or are we going to fish? Christian love is always centered in the needs of others, whether they are around the world or across the street or in our church.

What is Christian love? It’s a love that experiences Jesus sacrifice upon the cross and responds. It’s a love that keeps the commandments of God. It’s a love that acknowledges that we can’t love Him if we can’t love our fellow human beings. It’s love that is a response to the love of God made manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s love not only in word and speech but also in deed and action. (***“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18)***) It’s love that doesn't just sit there. It fishes!