

# Advent Conspiracy

## Part 4 - Love

We're in Part 4 of our Advent Conspiracy Series. We've looked at 3 words, 3 ideas or concepts that we're wrestling with and trying to apply to our celebration of Christmas.

We've talked about worship and the fact that we will all worship something or someone at this time of year. We think that should be Jesus which means He should be at the center of our celebration of Christmas. Then in week two I asked you to join me in rebelling against the empire of more, the kingdom of over-consumption and over-indulgence in which we live. Last week we talked about giving really good gifts to people around us that retell and reflect the story of Immanuel, God with us. And today we're going to talk about the 4<sup>th</sup> and final word: love.

Now, this is a word we use... a lot. I would even go out on a limb and say we overuse it. We use it to describe our affection for just about anything:

We love our kids

We love our spouses

We love our freedom

We love our sports teams

We love chocolate

We love steak

We love pizza

We love our dogs

Some even love their cats. Which is misguided at best.

We love a lot. We love so much that there are over 100 #1 hit songs with the word love in the title.

Back in 1956, Elvis wanted people to "Love me Tender". A few years later, he sang that he "Can't help falling in Love". Even though he couldn't help falling in love, some obviously could because there were some who had "lost that lovin' feelin'" according to the Righteous Brothers.

The Supremes wanted people to “Stop in the Name of Love” while the Beatles told us that “All You Need is Love.” A few years later, while The Partridge Family sang, “I think I love you,” Olivia Newton John could say, “I honestly Love you.”

In 1975, the Eagles were willing to give the “Best of my Love” and Captain and Tenille told us that “Love will keep us together.” By 1976, Paul McCartney was decrying all the “Silly Love Songs,” but REO Speedwagon vowed to “Keep on Lovin’ You.” It was the only thing they wanted to do.

Lionel Richie and Diana Ross knew that they would keep on loving because they sang about their “Endless love” in 1981 while Tina Turner wanted to know “What’s Love Got to do with it” in 1984.

In 1985, Whitney Houston was “Saving all my love for you” even as Foreigner said “I want to know what Love is.” Which is a great question don’t you think? This word gets thrown around so much you kind of walk away scratching your head thinking, “I really do want to know what it is.”

This is what I want us to think about this morning. This is a time of the year where feelings and expressions of love should be at a yearly high. If you’re a parent you love seeing the wonder and excitement on your child’s face on Christmas morning. It’s one of the things I love most about being a parent; being able to provide moments of wonder and joy and excitement for my kids.

Kids love this time of year because they get presents and they don’t have to go to school for a couple weeks, there’s always the possibility of snow and... they get presents. They love this time of year.

So we really love each other this time of year but I don’t want to confine it just to the people that are closest to us. It’s pretty easy for us to love our family and friends. I know some of you would like to raise your hand right now and push back a little bit on that but for the most part it’s natural for us to love those closest to us.

It’s pretty easy for me to love my kids. I’ve known them from the second they were born, they’re close to me, they love me, they bring joy into my life, they’re not teenagers yet, so it’s pretty easy for me to love them.

It's pretty easy to love my wife. It's a little harder for her to love me but we won't get into that today. But it's just become a part of who I am to love my wife. I've known her for the majority of my life, she's the mother of my children, she brings joy and excitement into my life, she makes me a better man and leader and pastor and I don't know what I would do without her. So it's pretty easy to love my wife.

My guess is that's how most, if not all, of the parents and grandparents and wives and husbands feel today. But I want us to think outside of that immediate circle of family that we spend most of our love on. We don't really even have to think about it or try to love them, it just happens. I want to push ourselves to think about loving people who aren't in our inner-circle.

So far in this series, we've talked about taking our cues on how we celebrate Christmas from the life and story of Jesus. I think we need to stay with that and take our cues from Him when it comes to loving people outside of that inner-circle. He's the model, the example, the one we follow and when you look at the broad scope of who Jesus loved, He didn't just love his inner circle.

He didn't stick with the Father and the Holy Spirit and the angels in heaven and just love on them. He left His inner-circle, we looked at this last week, he stepped down from Heaven to earth, from infinite to finite, from master to servant to show His love for us, for you.

When he started his public ministry He didn't just love and spend time around the people you would expect him to. The holy, righteous, Son of God didn't spend a lot of time around the holy, righteous, godly people of the day. He spent time around and actually liked the unholy, unrighteous, ungodly people of that day; the tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, those on the margins of that society. And they liked him.

Really what we're talking about today is the theology of Christmas. I know you guys woke up this morning hoping and praying that we would talk about the theology of Christmas today so here's the theology of Christmas in a nutshell: **God came for the poor**. That's the theology of Christmas and just in case you're wondering who the poor is, it's you and me.

When you look at what scripture says about the poor, there are obviously times when it's talking about the under-resourced or under-privileged. We'll get to that in a minute but ultimately, when it comes to matters of eternity, when it comes to matters of the ever-lasting soul inside each and every one of us, a "poor" person is anyone in need of God's saving grace.

This is why Jesus spent so much time with the people you wouldn't expect him to spend time with. They were the ones in need of God's grace.

Look what the apostle Paul says in a letter to the church in Corinth, *<sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)*

These verses don't mean what the televangelists' say they mean. This isn't about following Jesus and you're guaranteed wealth and riches.

This is about the extravagance of God's grace in sending His son to this earth. Jesus leaves the riches and glory of heaven to enter a broken, sin-scarred, poor, destitute world so the inhabitants of that world, you and I, could enjoy the riches of eternity and the riches of a relationship with Him. We just sang about it, God and sinner has been reconciled. We can't earn it, we don't deserve it but Jesus became poor so that we could be made rich.

This is the theology of Christmas. Jesus came to rescue the poor, the destitute, the spiritually bankrupt. It's why He should be at the center of our worship and focus at Christmas. Our King has come (and is coming again) and all glory is due unto him.

Now, let's get practical. How does that theology change the way we live? How should it affect how we celebrate and worship, not just at Christmas, but especially at Christmas?

I think it's pretty simple. He's showed up for us, He has loved us; the poor, the destitute, the spiritually bankrupt and if He's our leader, if He's the model that means it's our turn to love the poor/the destitute/the spiritually bankrupt. It's our turn to partner with God and in our own little way, bring bits and pieces of heaven to this

earth and make things new again. That's what it means to love people outside of our inner-circle.

I'm going to say something here and I'm going to say it bluntly because sometimes we just need that. It's not enough to remind ourselves of the story of Christmas at Christmas. It's not enough to regurgitate information we've heard before. It's not enough to come into this building during Advent, sing a few songs, remind ourselves that Jesus was born and then go home and open presents. It's just not enough.

We've got to find practical, tangible, concrete ways to live out the theology of Christmas. We have to find ways to reflect the self-sacrificial love that Jesus displayed and much of that has to do with how we treat those who are closest to us, our family and friends. Yes, absolutely, amen.

But.... we are fooling ourselves if we think that's where our love ends. If we're going to love as Jesus has loved us, if we're going to live out the theology of Christmas, we are going to have to come face to face with how we respond to the poor, the marginalized, the spiritually bankrupt, those on the margins of society.

You can't ignore it. It's all throughout the Bible. There are over 2,000 verses in the scriptures that are directly related to how we treat and take care of the poor. And now we're talking about the under-resourced and under-privileged. If you read the Gospels, you see over and over and over again, Jesus leaning towards, being drawn to, talking about, teaching about, standing up for the poor.

He wasn't the first one to do that. It wasn't a new concept. In the Old Testament you see the same theme. God told Israel to take care of orphans and widows, the strangers in their land, the people that were on the margins of society.

Look at what King Solomon said in *Proverbs 14:31*, *He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.* Here's how Eugene Peterson translates that verse in *The Message*, *You insult your Maker when you exploit the powerless; when you're kind to the poor, you honor God.*

Jesus made the same connection between how we treat the poor and how we treat God in *Matthew 25*. He does it by telling a prophetic story. He talks about how people respond to those who are hungry or thirsty, those who were naked or sick or in prison and this is what Jesus says about that, *<sup>40</sup>I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*

You know what that means? It means when we take care of “the least of these”, Jesus takes it personally. I don’t know how it works but Jesus says when you take care of the least of these, I take it personally.

Why wouldn’t He? He was poor. We just read from Corinthians how He chose to enter the story of mankind in poverty. It wasn’t just poverty compared to heaven, He came into this world through a poor family. Mary and Joseph were dirt poor.

You see hints of this towards the end of the Christmas story. According to Jewish law, after a baby was born you had to take it to the temple and make a sacrifice. You’re supposed to sacrifice a lamb. But at the end of *Luke 2* we’re told that Mary and Joseph went to the temple and sacrificed a pair of doves. But the law says to sacrifice a lamb.

Well, in Leviticus, there’s a provision that basically says, “If you’re so poor that you can’t afford a lamb, if you’re dirt poor, you can sacrifice two doves.” Mary and Joseph were dirt poor. Jesus was born to a dirt poor family.

Listen to how one author describes Jesus’ birth and the connection He had with the poor “The very first statement Jesus ever voiced about his concern for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, was when he cried out as one of them; eyes shut tight, mouth opened wide, wailing, and kicking. It’s one of the most profound acts of solidarity with the poor he could make.” -*The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor*

It’s not warm and fuzzy, you’re not going to find a Norman Rockwell painting displaying it but when Jesus was born, He was born into poverty. When God voted with His birth, He cast His vote for the poor.

If Jesus showed up for the poor, we need to show up for the poor. If he loved them, then we need to love them. If He remembered them then we must remember them.

I know what some of you are thinking because I have a similar thought anytime the preacher starts talking about this. The tendency is to think, “Pastor Tim, that’s all good and great and I agree we should help the poor and marginalized but it’s just too big of a problem. It’s just such a massive issue. There’s no way my little effort can even make a dent.” I understand that because that’s where I’m at most of the time. That’s what I think when I look at all the issues facing our world.

But here’s what I want you to hear. I want you to hear the words of an expert on this matter. Mother Teresa said, “If I look at the masses I won’t act. If I look at the one I will.” So here’s my challenge for you personally this morning: do for one what you wish you could do for all.

We all know, we all realize nobody here has the resources to solve all of the world’s problems. But that shouldn’t stop us from being a part of the solution. Do for one what you wish you could do for all.

Let’s go back to the story Jesus told in *Matthew 25* for a minute. He says this, *<sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

I want you to notice what it doesn’t say. It doesn’t say, “I was hungry and you built me a chain of restaurants.” “I was sick and you went to medical school.” There’s nothing wrong with either of those options but that’s not the expectation. Jesus doesn’t expect us to act on behalf of the masses. He expects us to act on behalf of the one. Do for one what you wish you could do for all.

This is just really practical stuff. You need some food? I’ve got some extra, here you go. You need something to drink? I got plenty of that, here’s some of mine. You

need some clothes? I've got more than enough. You need somebody to talk to and visit with you while you're in prison? Absolutely, I'm there.

See, when we look at all the poverty, all the issues we face in our city, our country, our world, when we look at the masses we freeze. We don't act. But when we look at the one, when we look at the manageable, when we look at the practical, we will do for one what we wish we could for all.

Showing up for the poor, the marginalized, is much easier than we think. It's providing the practical, every day things that change the world. Things like clean water.

You and I have to walk 20 feet to get clean water. We just have to go the faucet. Can you imagine having to wake up at dawn every morning and walk 7 miles, just to get water, and its water that you're not even sure is clean?

How would that affect your productivity? Ladies, (because it's usually the wife who does this) how would it affect your health to have to carry 40 pounds of water 7 miles every day? How would it affect you emotionally to question yourself every time you gave your children a drink of water knowing it might cause serious illness or even death but what are you supposed to do? Not give them anything to drink? Can you imagine?

This is the reality for about 1.1 billion people in our world today. 1.1 billion people have little to no access to clean water. That's a massive number of people. That's a little bit too big of a group to feel like you can even make a dent in the issue. So let's not look at the masses, let's just look at the one. Let's do for one what we wish we could do for all.

This is how we, as a church, want to live out the theology of Christmas. We want to show up for communities in Zambia with little or no access to clean water. You've got an insert in your worship folder talking about that.

We're going to remember the "least of these", we're going to show up for some moms in Zambia so they don't have to walk miles to get water for their family. Will that change the whole world? No, but it'll change her world.

We don't want to stop there. We want to show up for the people on the margins of society in our own backyard. We want to show up for the young men who find themselves at the Kansas Juvenile Correctional Facility by helping support Randy Knight to get him to full time status with Youth for Christ. Randy's got some big ideas and tons of passion to minister to those young men and we just want to come alongside of him and help him be able to do that.

I know there's some skepticism out there anytime you start talking about prison ministry. I understand that and I certainly battle that myself but here's the conclusion I've come to. Not only do I believe Jesus takes it personally when we do or do not show up for young men like that but I can do nothing to obtain God's grace. I can't earn it, can't pay Him for it, and I certainly don't deserve it.

Those boys, as many mistakes and poor choices as they've made to end up in that correctional facility, don't deserve our grace and that is all the more reason to give it to them. How can we accept God's extravagant grace and then keep it all to ourselves? Those young men are a part of the poor, the marginalized, the spiritually bankrupt in our society and we're going to show up for them in a practical way.

But let's bring it even closer to home. We've got people in our own congregation that need gifts of grace this Christmas. They need a cup of cold water in Jesus name just as much as the people of Zambia do. Through our collective giving today we have an opportunity to say, "Your church family loves you and we want to show you how much we love you by taking care of some practical, tangible needs in your life."

So that's how we're going to love, as a church, this Christmas. I really want to challenge you to think how you're going to love this Christmas. Not just your inner-circle but those in your world, in our society that find themselves poor, marginalized, bankrupt and need to see a practical, tangible expression of love this Christmas.

It's not enough to talk about and sing about and read the story of Christmas. We've got to live this out. Not just as a church but as individuals. This is how we're planning on doing for one what we wish we could do for all. How will you and your

family do that this Christmas? How will you do for one what you wish you could do for all?

We've talked about how we're going to do that as a church and now it's time to do it. We're going to end this morning with the offering. We're going to worship Jesus with our money. This morning's offering is our gift to people that we want to say, "In Jesus name, we love you." Ultimately this offering is a gift we're giving to Jesus. Because when we give to the "least of these" Jesus takes it personally.

I've tried to be very clear about this but I just want to say one more time, unless you specifically tell us on your check or envelope or however you're planning to give that you don't want your gift to go right back out the door, it's going right back out the door. We're not going to think any less of you, we're not going to put you on the naughty list if you don't want your gift to go to these causes. We just want to make sure we keep our financial records straight. So please be as clear as possible with that.

The worship team is going to come and lead us in a few songs of response, I'm going to ask you to stand and the ushers will come in a moment and we'll receive the offering this morning.

I really want us to approach this time with joy. Our God has showed up in human history for us and blessed us beyond what we could even imagine. We're simply giving back out of the abundance that we've been blessed with. We're showing up to love people outside of our inner-circle. Let's worship the one who loves us.