

Christian Love

Our sermon title this week is “Christian Love.” The main text that we will read through is found in the Old Testament and some may question how we come to talk about Christian love drawn from an Old Testament text.

With God’s help, I may be able to tie this together. As I read through the text, I asked myself did the main figure show even a small amount of love or compassion for his fellow man. The answer is no. I then looked at what lengths God had gone to and how God had done everything to save the community and I see love. I see the love that we find defined in the 13th chapter of First Corinthians.

There are many who believe the sole purpose of the 13th chapter of First Corinthians is to provide some text for wedding ceremonies. It was written by Paul to a church that had many problems. One of those problems involved people wanting specific gifts of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 12, Paul addresses unity and the reality that each person has their individual talents and gifts. He tells us that the gifts are according the will of the Holy Spirit (12:11). He ends the 12th chapter by pointing to the better gifts (12:31).

In the first verse of chapter 13, Paul tells us that having gifts without love in meaningless.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have *the gift of prophecy*, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-4 NASB)

Paul now defines this love which is the trait that must be present for anything else to have meaning. This is what we often hear at wedding ceremonies. It is the love that we Christians need to have.

We won't read these this morning but we will list the qualities that define love. Love is patient, kind, not jealous, not given to bragging, does not behave in an unseemly manner, is not self-seeking, is not easily provoked, is long-suffering, is happy in righteousness and truth, is not suspicious, is full of hope, and is ready to endure through all times. From a romantic position, this is the kind of love we seek when we marry another. Yet, this is the kind of love that should exist in a Christian and especially within the church. I believe that I can make a compelling case that this is Christian love.

Paul ends this discussion of love with these words: **But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13 NASB)**
The greatest gift is love.

Now we have this definition of love as our foundation, we are ready to turn our attention to an event that is recorded in the Old Testament. The events surrounding an opportunity that God offered to a large city to come to repentance and be spared. This event is recorded in the small book known as Jonah.

There are people who look at this event and laugh. They think that we are silly people for believing that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Well, the Bible says big fish and not whale. The event is mentioned by Jesus when He predicted His death and resurrection (Matthew 12:38-40). When we start trimming out the parts of the Bible we find unbelievable, we have elevated ourselves to a position above God. I have never met anyone who was remotely approaching that level. So, I will stick with this event.

Today, we will pick up on the record following the rather unimpressive message presented by Jonah. Without flashing lights, without polished oration, without a “feel-good” message, Jonah simply went through the streets of Nineveh crying out, **“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” (Jonah 3:4 NASB)**

They repented and called out to God. Here’s where we will pick up our reading in this very short book. We will begin the 10th verse of chapter 3.

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*. (Jonah 3:10 NASB)

The book of Jonah could have ended right there. A sinful city in Assyria had a messenger from God go and tell them they were doomed to be captured by outsiders as a demonstration of the wrath of God. They repented and called on God. God spared the city. Certainly, a good story with a happy ending. The book does not end at this point.

Let’s take a few moments to look at Jonah. As we look at Jonah, let’s remember that we are doing so against the backdrop of Christian love. Initially, Jonah ran from going to Nineveh with the message from God. God’s message is a warning, yet Jonah chose not to go. When Jonah finally gets to Nineveh and takes God’s message, there is repentance and God spares them. At this point we would think that Jonah would be happy for the city. Let’s read on into the 4th chapter of Jonah.

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore, in order to forestall this, I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” (Jonah 4:1-3 NASB)

Can you believe that reaction? God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah runs toward Tarshish. God asked us to make disciples (Matthew 28:19) and we run to our recliners and hide behind a screen (TV or computer). Our response is similar to Jonah’s. God loves everybody so He will save everybody. If I must give up my personal comfort to do God’s will, I might just as well be dead.

In verse 4, God asked the question: **“Do you have good reason to be angry?”**

Jonah is outside of the city and ready to see if God does anything to the city. Jonah wants a ring-side seat. God uses this time to teach Jonah a lesson.

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. So, the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. (Jonah 4:5-6 NASB)

Jonah is sitting outside and trying to find a shady spot to rest and await what may happen to Nineveh. God causes a plant to spring up and provide shade. All is right in Jonah’s world. Jonah is extremely happy. Now it is time for God to teach Jonah a lesson.

But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.” (Jonah 4:7-8 NASB)

Are we somewhat like Jonah? When we are not comfortable, we are upset. We may not prefer death over discomfort but we are not happy. We don't want God to make us uncomfortable. We don't want God to tug us away from our comfort to do His will. There may be times when God removes some of our comfort to call us back to His reality.

God now makes Jonah face the reality as God sees it.

Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” Then the LORD said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” (Jonah 4:9-11 NASB)

We started this morning with a reading from 1 Corinthians 13 about love. We have now considered Jonah and his reaction to God sparing the city of Nineveh. How well did Jonah match up with the definition of love?

Jonah was not very patient with the call of the city of Nineveh. He certainly was not long-suffering for them. Above all else, he was not happy with the truth of God's love. He was not ready to endure anything to help the people of Nineveh.

There must be an application for us today. We have been called to take a message of destruction to people who may or may not want to hear our message. From the closing portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that many will not enter into the eternal life that is promised.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

(Matthew 7:13-14 NASB)

Jonah was called to go to Nineveh and we are called to share the message of repentance with people who are equally don't know their right hand from their left.

What is our call? **Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20 NASB)**

Our refusal is a clear indication that we do not have compassion on the lost world. We are lacking Christian love when we allow our personal comfort to stop us from reaching out to those around us.

God felt compassion for the 120,000 people in Nineveh. Do we feel the same compassion for the few hundred within our community?