

ADVENT 2022 @ SEVERNA PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Christmas is near and love is in the air. Love is featured in the songs we hear as we shop for presents and in the commercials we see in media (“Show someone they’re special/loved with this gift!”). It’s written in the cards we send and the tags we attach to presents. Love is a prominent and magical feeling from Fall and climaxing at the Christmas season. And then there’s winter blues, which hopefully this this advent series and study in God’s word equips and reminds you that you that love is not absent, and God does not abandon His children.

Christmas is the celebration of God’s perfect love coming down. As we recognize the advent season with lighting candles, singing songs, and reading Scriptures, may we be reminded that Christmas is more than a magical feeling but a powerful presence pushing back the darkness.

This advent study will guide our church family through 25 readings, mostly from 1 Corinthians 13. This passage of Scripture is being taught each Sunday for you not only to understand the biblical definition of love but grow in appreciation for God’s love coming down through Jesus Christ. Additionally, our weekly Sunday advent readings will be shared for us to reflect on the Christmas events.

Each of us are encouraged to participate in the devotional readings for personal spiritual growth, unifying hope, and opportunities to discuss your faith with others during the Christmas season. In all, thank you for being a church who gathers in faith, grows in hope, and goes in love with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas and may the Lord bless in the new year of 2023.

DAY 1

1 Corinthians 13:1 "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Paul starts this chapter with typical Christmas flair, speaking about angels. Angels surround the collection of Scriptures and carols about the birth of Christ. And we know angels can speak in human language so individuals can understand God's message at certain moments. But apparently individuals were speaking frequently with a divine language – tongues – as Paul writes about in the previous (12:10) and successive chapters (14:1-28).

As a toddler begins to speak words that can be difficult to discern what is being said. Typically, a parent understands and translates what the child has spoken. Parents can understand garbled or jumbled words of a child because of their close relationship with the child.

Likewise, Paul is reminding that without love, our words sound like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Generally, these instruments produce significant noise but not special music. These instruments must be used in concert with other instruments and played in a proper way to make a pleasing sound. The word "symphony" means "same sound." You never see a guy with a cow bell having a solo; at least you never should! If our words are not used to build up but tear down, then we are out of harmony with God's design.

When our words are unloving, we are reminded God's Word came down to forgive us and inspire us to righteousness and compassion. Let God's words be in your heart and on your lips.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that reminds you of God's love and grace for you in Jesus Christ.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your words to be gracious and truthful.
- Make a commitment to meaningfully tell others in your life, "I love you."

DAY 2

1 Corinthians 13:2 “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Paul continues the Christmas festivity as he references prophecy. We cannot know about Christ or celebrate Christmas without prophetic gifts and fulfillment. He lists a series of impressive spiritual gifts and powers with prophecy or revelatory insight, understanding knowledge and discernment of mysteries, faith – enough to move mountains, sacrificial giving, and even martyrdom. Paul reminds us we can be extraordinarily talented and publicly serving others, but if we lack sincerity of love, then we are nothing. We could add all our actions, calculate the hours spent, total the investments we give, which all may be a substantial amount. But if we do these things because we are waiting for recognition, then we have bought into the lie of religion.

Some people attend or join a church wondering, “Where can I use my gifts?” or “Why are my gifts not recognized?” Yet, what Paul would say, is that your greatest gift as a church member is to love others. Do that first and frequently, and when people see you really care about them, then you’ll learn *when* and *how* to use your other talents/gifts.

You see, religion says, “If I do or give, then I can be rewarded.” Every religion in the world teaches us that the divine accepts us based on works. And religion can produce passionate and dependable adherents. Yet, religion can also lead you to the path of emptiness and eternal darkness. The Corinthians were impressively religious on the outside. Their worship services were dynamic and lively. They had miraculous signs, educated and gifted speakers, eloquent prayers, affluent and generous givers, zealous workers. Yet, their spiritual life on the inside was hollow and unhealthy.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that reminds you God is faithful to His promises.
- Look up some of the prophecies concerning the birth of Christ. Which is your favorite?
- Give someone a gift who least expects and could never return the favor.

DAY 3

1 Corinthians 13:3 "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Paul lived during a time when many Christians were martyred for their faith. In fact, before his conversion to Christianity, he was the reason why many men, women, and children were persecuted and martyred. After his faith, he learned much what it meant to suffer for the name of Jesus (Acts 9:16). While martyrdom is the ultimate sacrifice, the first item Paul mentions surrendering is our possessions.

There is an account in the Gospels where a man had an abundance of possessions (cf. Matthew 19:16-22). He had good morals and was kind toward others. Yet, instead of viewing his possessions as merely useful, he viewed them as ultimate. The man wanted to follow Jesus, but when Jesus asked him to give everything away to begin his journey, the man was stalled. His possessions owned his heart and affections, and he was unwilling to take any next steps in truly following Jesus.

- Reflect on a Scripture, hymn, Christmas song that reminds us to give up what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose.
- Based on today's reading, what is the Holy Spirit identifying as a hindrance to you taking next steps with Jesus?
- Remember, Christmas is about God's ultimate sacrifice and Jesus' surrender to become human and eventually die for us. The only way we can live lovingly and generous is by trusting in the One who was both toward us. Spend a few moments thanking Jesus for His birth, life, and sacrifice for you.

DAY 4

Luke 1:5-15 "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

- How does this passage encourage your faith in Jesus?
- What is one insight that stood out to you in today's sermon?
- Who is someone you encountered today that you will pray for and minister to this week?

DAY 5

1 Corinthians 13:4 "Love is patient."

The Christmas season is filled with all kinds of hurry. Between traffic or shopping lines for presents or special meals, the mad rush can make you want to stay inside and skip this next month. Yet, when we take a deep breath and remember the reason we are going the extra mile, we are able to have perspective and patience.

The Bible has two words for patience: "hupomene," which is patience in circumstances, and "makrothumia," which is patience with people. You see there's a difference between merely waiting in a long line at the grocery store or Disney and waiting in that same line with a child screaming its head off because it wants a third round of candy; or the dad who has bumped you with the stroller for the 6th time in line; or the woman who keeps attempting to cut in front of you when you're not looking.

While both words and aspects of patience are essential for Christians, this latter word is used in 1Corinthians 13:4. One version translates the word as "long-suffering," which has a distinctive imagery. Agape love suffers long and shouldn't have a short fuse for anger. Christians are to make allowances for gaffes, growth, and to give second chances to others. Why? Because God is long-suffering toward us and patient with our recurring shortcomings. The tip for being patient with others is not just in willpower but the Spirit's power (cf. Galatians 5:22).

- Reflect on another Scripture or Christmas song that encourages us to love others.
- Who or what has tested your patience recently? If you were impatient with someone, consider apologizing to them and asking forgiveness. Explain what motivated your actions to pursue grace.

DAY 6

1 Corinthians 13:4 "love is kind"

Have you ever received a small gift that you did not expect but it mattered much? The fact that someone would take the time to think about you reveals they care. Even something small can prove big. We often think bigger is better but small can be significant. Small actions and attention to little details can accumulate to reflect a substantial difference. If we think kindness is inconsequential, then we have missed understanding the incomparable kindness of God.

When Paul uses this word, he invents a word that is only used once in the entire Bible. A word with a single usage might appear unimportant and irrelevant, yet we know that without kindness life can be awfully harsh and unhelpful. Paul knew the kindness of God was his greatest gift that empowered him to generously share his time, talents, and treasure with others (cf. Titus 3:5-8). Further, he exhorted every follower of Jesus to express kindness (cf. Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12). In fact, the early church was sometimes called "chrestiani" rather than "christiani"; two words sounding similar but the latter meaning little Christ's – "Christians," and the former meaning "Kindness people." Someone said, "kindness is a language that even the deaf can hear and the blind can read." This is the call of Christmas and should be the character of every Christian.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that makes you smile and inspires kindness.
- Look up and read the verses mentioned above. What stands out to you?

DAY 7

1 Corinthians 13:4 "love does not envy"

Comparison is the enemy of contentment. Sometimes Christmas season can be the most challenging because we are not able to give the gifts we would like, or we do not receive the gifts we would want. We need to remember that Christmas is not meant to instigate jealousy but inspire us with the joy of Jesus.

The Corinthian church was engulfed with envy. They divided over which human leader was superior, and which clique was better to belong (1 Corinthians 3:3). They were greedy over possessions, jobs, family dynamics, and even food (1 Corinthians 6:10; 9:3-5; 11:18-22). They were envious over one another's spiritual gifts and ways people served in their church (1 Corinthians 12). Paul wanted to correct their covetousness and help them to see that love from God brings contentment that results in compassion for others.

Jealousy is dangerous. It makes our bones rot (Proverbs 14:30). Envy is like kudzu of the heart that grows and engulfs every area of a person's life. The only remedy for envy is the gospel. When we realize our Heavenly Father is wise, good and provides for our needs, then the boundary lines that occur in our life are understood as blessings. We do not need to fret but simply have faith and trust His love.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that makes you joyful.
- What makes you happy? Make a list and identify which things God has already provided you, and which are constructive goals, and which are unhealthy envy.
- What will it take for you to display trust and joy in your relationships rather than jealousy?

DAY 8

1 Corinthians 13:4 "love does not boast; it is not arrogant"

We have been reflecting that at Christmas, love came down. In other words, the great and glorious Son of God left heaven to enter earth. Jesus did not relinquish deity, but He humbly took on humanity with flesh and bones to be born of a woman. The Gospels reveal that all of Jesus' life from childhood to adulthood was meager to average resources: born in a manger, lived in rural Nazareth, labored as a builder and carpenter; and upon public ministry became a traveling homeless teacher of ordinary disciples, and spending time among outcasts and unwanted among society.

Christianity is not merely for the rich and reputable but available for anyone willing to humbly acknowledge their need for grace. The Corinthian church were quite prideful and boastful. They boasted of their resume with education and experience (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:31; 3:18). They foolishly bragged about immoral exploits and idolatrous practices (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6; 8:2). They went beyond boasting to promote themselves to arrogance and belittling others (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 12:21-26; 14:36-48).

Paul challenged the Corinthian mindset of self-promotion to unselfish humility. Instead of big-headed, they were to become big-hearted because love does not boast. Boasting is a sign of insecurity and immaturity, not influence. In God's kingdom, greatness is serving others (cf. Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:3-5). Love condescends, it bends and crouches, it stretches and reaches in ways that the human mind can barely imagine. God's love is not earned by abilities or actions but simply received by grace through faith. Therefore, how can we boast of anything else other than the cross of Jesus and grace that has reached selfish sinners?

- Reflect on a Christmas song that meaningful explains the gospel of Jesus.
- What empties you of selfish pride and fills you with gratitude and worship of God?
- Look up and read the verses mentioned above. What stands out to you?
- Have a "High 5" by inviting five people to Sunday gatherings in December and Christmas evening service at SPBC. While all five may not attend, hopefully at least one will. Imagine if every member brags about Jesus and invites their friends and neighbors to church. How could that impact your friends? How would that impact your church?

DAY 9

1 Corinthians 13:5 “love is not rude”

The Christmas consumer rush is notorious for rude behavior. Winding traffic lines with drivers not wanting to let people enter lanes. Extended grocery lines with customers complaining about slow cashiers or not enough open registers. Out of stock items due to mass purchases for inflated sale of items online. Irrational people who give fruit cake as a gift... ahem!

Seriously, Paul writes about this word to communicate that people who are disconnected from God will lack dignity toward His image bearers. One translation of this word is “behaving unseemly.” Thinking about levels of love, this word is sometimes used to describe indecent behavior of one’s body outside of God’s design (cf 1 Corinthians 7:36; 12:23; Romans 1:27; Revelation 16:15). Frankly, lust is not love.

Therefore, the contrast of Paul’s phrasing is to be understood that Christians are to be upright, respectful, thoughtful, and well-mannered. That doesn’t mean Christians are beholden to every social etiquette, but they are bound to biblical etiquette. The Bible is filled with principles and commands for how to behave in word and deed. Christians grieve the Holy Spirit when rudeness rears its ugly and unloving head. Brothers and sisters, this should not be.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that celebrates God’s love and goodwill to others.
- Look up and read the verses mentioned above. What stands out to you?

DAY 10

1 Corinthians 13:5 "love does not insist on its own way"

This chapter is frequently read at weddings. Its description of love inspires couples to live unselfishly and give generously. But this chapter is not about a wedding but a worship community. The letter was written to a church, who apparently had narcissistic members and domineering leaders. Paul writes to this Christian community to help them learn how to treat one another as God has treated us, with profound humility and self-sacrificing love.

Love is other-oriented. Self-love is necessary for mental health and physical care. But an over-emphasis on self-love can result in unhealthy vanity and superiority. Love does not insist on "my way or the highway," but instead persists in following Jesus' way. Jesus modeled sacrificial love for us in the garden of Gethsemane, praying, "Not my will but Thy will be done." (Matthew 26:39) Jesus' prayer reminds us the greatest way to care for ourself is to trust the Lord and give ourselves for His purpose.

- Reflect on another Christmas song that celebrates God's love and goodwill to others.
- Look up and read the accounts of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45; Luke 22:39-46; John 17). What are the differences? Based on this being one of Jesus' last intentional actions before His death, what appears to matter most to Jesus?
- As a selfless act, spend some time praying intentionally for 5 people in your church family. Contact them to let them know you have prayed for them.

DAY 11

Luke 1:26-38 “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.”

- How does this passage encourage your faith in Jesus?
- What is one insight that stood out to you in today's sermon?
- Who is someone you encountered today that you will pray for and minister to this week?

DAY 12

1 Corinthians 13:5 "love is not irritable"

Some people start Christmas early. They love to decorate the outside of their house with lights and other decorations. Inside the house, the tree goes up, stockings are hung, and Christmas music begins playing throughout the rooms. Yet, for others, the consumerism of Christmas creates irritation. It has caused the other holidays to be hurried and overlooked. Eat your turkey and now put up the tree!

Christmas is not meant to aggravate as much as love is not meant to be anger. Love is not cranky or crabby, grumpy or grouchy, easily ticked off, or cause one to give the silent treatment. "Irritability is anger's trigger finger." What annoys us says something more about our own character than it does about the other person's actions. Therefore, we must discipline our heart so that our words and responses toward others reflect Christ and not our personal critiques.

Jesus' life was inflicted with irritations from beginning to end. The nativity accounts reflect the aggravations of unplanned pregnancy. While we don't know much about Jesus' childhood, it seems anything but normal. His ministry had fickle followers, people who disappointed Him, religious leaders who protested and conspired against Him, and enemies who plotted His death. Further, a corrupt government ignored impartiality and declined justice with soldiers venting their wrath at His execution. Yet, from beginning to end, Jesus was slow to anger and abounding in love. He continues to relate this way toward us because His love is wide and deep.

- Reflect on a Christmas song that calms your spirit and gives you peace.
- Research a Psalm that speaks to your heart. Write it out by hand.
- Write a list of some things that are irritating your spirit. Share this list with a trusted friend and ask them to pray for God's peace in circumstances and resolution in relationships.

DAY 13

1 Corinthians 13:5 "love is not resentful"

They say, "revenge is a dish best served cold." Our humanity has a guilty pleasure when it comes to resentment. We crave secular karma and feed off the downfall of those whom we disagree or have separated. You are probably thinking of a person or experience right now reading this devotional. And God wants to remind you that love is not resentful.

Another translation of today's passage is "love keeps no account/record of wrongs." Paul's imagery of debts or bookkeeping helps us to understand love is free and unconditioned upon one's behavior. Love doesn't have a ledger to add or subtract.

The Corinthian church ledger was weighty as conflicts became personal and public in courtrooms (1 Cor 3:4; 6:1). Paul exhorted them to exhibit grace in their grievances with one another. There are times when we can win arguments or score debate points but lose a relationship. We need to ask ourselves, "Is my conflict with someone worth advancing?" Sometimes conflict is necessary to address an issue and hold one another accountable. But other times, our annoyances and anger have more to do with our own issues than another.

In Christ, our personal ledgers of sin have been erased and cleansed. His forgiveness is immediate. In our relationship with others, the process of reconciliation may feel like a marathon, but the first step is to forgive. Forgiveness protects us from the deeper wounds of bitterness (cf Luke Matthew 6:14; 18:35; Luke 7:47; Ephesians 4:31-32).

- Look up and read the verses mentioned above. What stands out to you?
- What other Scripture passages do you find relevant to forgiveness, protecting against bitterness, and reconciliation?
- Based on today's readings, what is the Holy Spirit identifying as an action step for you?

DAY 14

1 Corinthians 13:6 “love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth”

A popular modern phrase is: “Love wins.” Christians can rejoice where God’s love leads people to a life of joy and trust in Him. Yet, God’s love does not win where people are finding their joy and identity apart from Him. Some have bought into the lie that love is love in general, when the specific truth is, God is love (1 John 4:7).

The Corinthians’ celebrated wrongdoing and falsehoods. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he responds to their immorality with the question, “*Do you not know?*” (1Cor 3:16; 5:6; 6:2-3; 6:9, 15-16, 19; 9:13, 24). Paul’s aim was to replace Satan’s lie with God’s truth. We love others by asking questions and leading them to evaluate choices based on timeless truth not passing trends or fleeting passions.

Further, today’s news cycle and social media culture can be compared to vultures hovering over the latest personal failure or public fiasco. But agape love does not delight in another’s downfall. Christians should not join the chorus of celebration at the inadequacies of individuals made in the image of God, regardless if it elevates one’s political agenda or personal goals. God’s people are better than that type of character because we know the grace of God at our most unworthy moments. Love covers a multitude of sins (cf 1 Peter 4:8).

- Search for Christmas song lyrics that ask a question. Reflect how the lyrics answer that question with gospel truth versus worldly wisdom.
- Look up and read the verses mentioned above. What stands out to you?

DAY 15

1 Corinthians 13:7-8 “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”

The Christmas spirit brings us a month, or at most two months of benevolence and happiness. Gift-giving occurs on multiple days, but most especially on Christmas evening and day. For a few moments, people are joyful and generous, even toward strangers. This wonderful time of the year makes us wonder why we cannot continue to care for others for successive days and months.

The apostle Paul writes about love's endurance. It survives struggles and storms. That's the word imagery for bearing all circumstances. Love is the protective covering from the elements of any weather: sun's oppressive heat, fierce winds, or pummeling rain. Agape love is a refuge and defender (cf Psalm 18:1-2; 46:1-3; 91:1-4). Further, Paul's language of endurance is battle imagery. Godly love helps us discern to fight for the right principles in the right manner.

Overall, Paul isn't just an over-realized optimist or half-heartedly seeing a silver lining. Instead, Paul understands the impact of eternity. The Corinthian church was full of sinners and fellow strugglers who needed reminded that God's love sees what we can become and offers hope to each of us.

- Look up the background and listen to the Christmas song, “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day.” How does this song relate to enduring love in a callous and cruel society?
- While the love of many may grow cold, what is one way you can share the warmth of God's love this Christmas season? Consider donating time or financial towards a local compassion organization. Ask our church office for recommendations if needed.

DAY 16

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”

Make a list of important elements about our church. Start with what happens on Sunday and move on throughout the week. Do you know what happens at the church building Monday – Thursday? How about Friday’s and Saturday’s? Which elements are most helpful for your personal and spiritual life?

In Corinth, the important elements appeared to be individual gifts. As mentioned on days one and two of these advent readings, we are nothing without love. Buildings and calendar schedules are mere tools for the task of unifying the church body in faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Even ministry programs and spiritual gifts are secondary because they are temporary, compared to the primary element of loving people, which will last forever. In other words, love will never go out of style.

The vital vision and steady strategy of our church is to be faithful in our love for the Lord and one another.

- Research and reflect on some of prophecies concerning Christ’s birth.
- Write a thank you note (text/email/letter) to 5 people for using their spiritual gifts to reflect God’s love to you.

DAY 17

1 Corinthians 13:11 “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”

Some people have the gift of wrapping, while others, not so much! Wrapping gifts takes more time and care than throwing the gift in a bag. It takes thought in selecting the style of paper. It takes time and precision to cut the paper at the correct length. It takes skill, and it seems like three extra thumbs, to fold the paper in the proper places that fit the gift or box. Besides, after the gift is wrapped, the recipient immediately tears the paper to shreds and immediately discards it. Unless the recipient is a toddler. Small children seem more enamored with the wrapping paper rather than the gift.

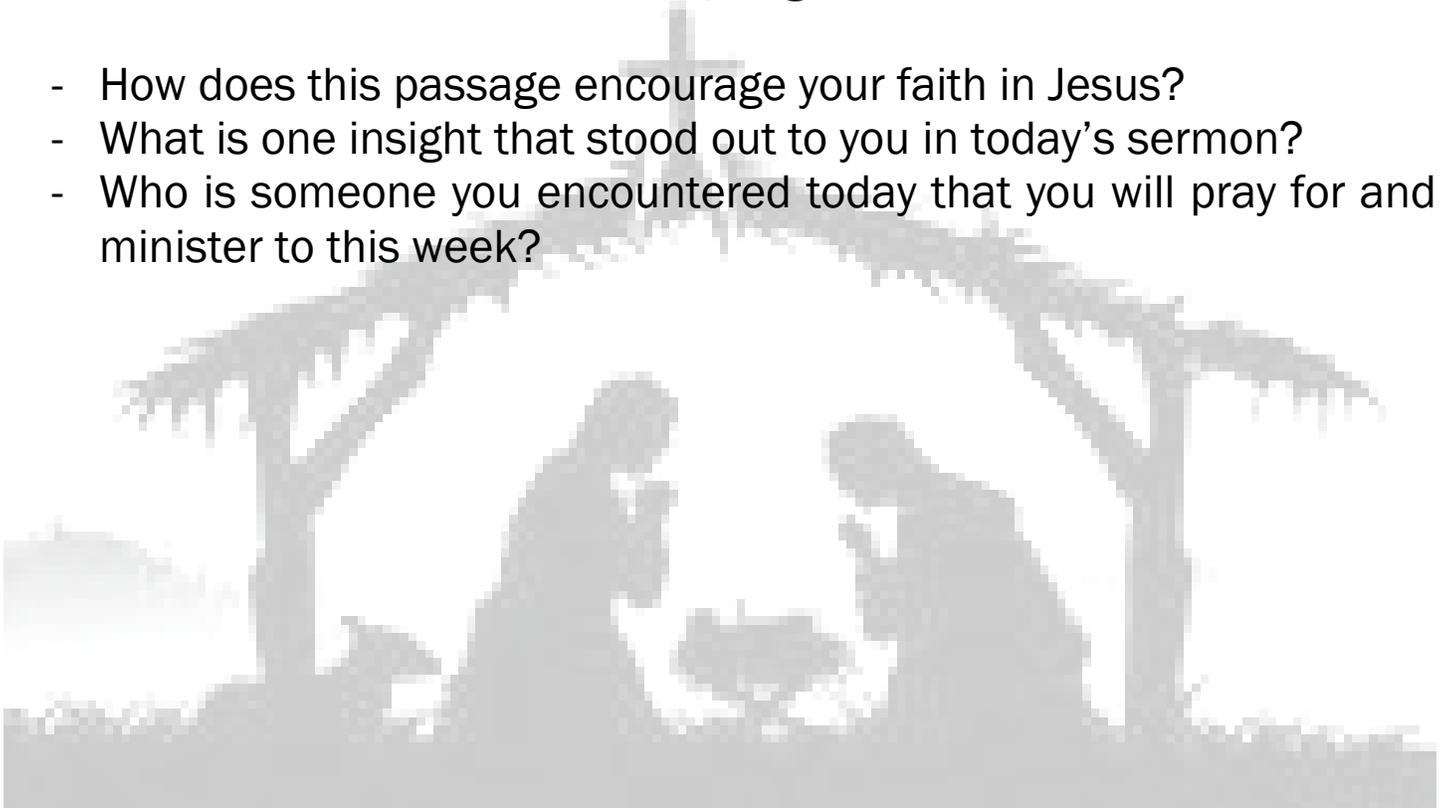
Paul says, spiritually speaking, we are like immature infants playing with wrapping paper if we lack love. The Corinthians certainly were childish in their faith. Paul sought to help them correct childish behaviors and mature in their faith and practices. He illustrates with his own life to surrender childish habits and grow in thoughts, words, and actions as a mature follower of Jesus.

- What is your favorite child-like Christmas song?
- In what ways might your faith be undeveloped or immature? If you have difficulty identifying any areas, ask a trusted Christian friend for their input. Then take steps to begin spiritual growth.

DAY 18

Luke 1:46-55 “Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

- How does this passage encourage your faith in Jesus?
- What is one insight that stood out to you in today’s sermon?
- Who is someone you encountered today that you will pray for and minister to this week?



DAY 19

1 Corinthians 13:12 "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Some people look in the mirror in the morning and that's it. Others take multiple peeks at their reflection to make sure their appearance remains what they want presented. Sometimes hair gets out of place, makeup gets smudged, a bat is in the cave (that's coy lingo between friends to encourage them to grab a tissue), or the worst is when food remnants linger on your teeth, facial hair, or stain on your clothing.

The Corinthians were known for their bronze metal work, often used as mirrors. They were not the best of quality, and so reflections were viewed dimly. Paul noted that life on earth has a dim perspective. We do not always see things clearly. We lack information and understanding. We have faults and shortcomings. We need lots of grace to gain wisdom and mature in a biblical worldview.

God's light shines in the darkness. He sees and knows us fully. There is nothing hidden from His sight. God's word is like a mirror that reveals what is inside our heart (cf. Hebrews 4:12; James 1:23-24). And one day, Jesus will return for us to see Him face to face. His blazing eyes will confront us based upon our acknowledgement of Christ as our Lord and Savior (cf Revelation 1:14; 19:12-16). The first advent is meant to prepare us for the second advent. Are you ready?

- Look up the background and listen to the Christmas carol, "Joy To The World." How does this carol relate to the first and second advent?
- Pray for the salvation of someone who's spiritual life is dim. Look for opportunities this week to share the message of Christmas and the gospel with them.

DAY 20

1 Corinthians 13:13 “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: but the greatest of these is love.”

We are nearing conclusion of reflecting upon God’s love and the celebration of Christ’s birth, Our church started this series in 1 Corinthians 13 in November, and now we are close to December 25 and the new year. As you look at this verse, Paul communicates a powerful trio that permeate the lives of Christians and churches: faith, hope, and love. These three aims are helpful for us to consider in our own spiritual life and membership at SPBC.

We gather in faith. Every Sunday we unite to express our trust in God and thankfulness for the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. We sing biblical truth to praise God and to encourage one another. We pray and place our troubles in God’s hands, trusting He is working all things together for good. We listen to God’s truth and His precious promises spoken and taught in the preaching of the word and the ordinances. While we are many with diverse backgrounds, the reality of a shared grace calls us to gather in faith and as church family.

We grow in hope. We have multiple opportunities to mature in our spiritual growth. Sunday morning Bible studies have excellent teaching and engaging discussion. There are a variety of gospel groups with a handful of families who meet for friendship and faith building experiences. If you are not part of a gospel group, you are missing a significant opportunity to receive and give support within your church family. Ultimately, we see and meet needs as the Spirit enables to grow in hope that God is with us.

We go in love. As we journey through our daily and weekly schedules, we are salt and light. We are not thermometers who are shaped by worldly standards, but thermostats having impact on our neighbors near and far. We give of our time, talent, and treasure to spread truth, life, and love that we have received from Jesus.

- Look up the background and listen to the Christmas carol, “Go Tell It One The Mountain.” What’s the reason we gather, grow, and go tell?
- Tell your family members you love them in a unique way this week.

DAY 21

Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Isaiah 9:1-7¹ But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

- Why is it important that Jesus was born of a virgin?
- Of the four names mentioned in 9:6, which is most meaningful to you?
- Reflecting on this passage, what is one application you will follow today?

DAY 22

John 1:1-18 ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

- Light a candle and reflect upon Jesus being the light of the world.
- How does this passage encourage your faith in Jesus?
- Reflecting on this passage, what is one application you will follow today?

DAY 23

Matthew 1:18-25 ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

- How does Joseph’s integrity inspire Christians today?
- Reflecting on this passage, what is one application you will follow today?
- Remember to invite someone to join you for Christmas Eve services 4pm / 6:30pm. www.spbcmd.com/events

DAY 24

Luke 2:4-20 “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

- Wait until dark and go outside. Take note of your 5 senses. Imagine being a shepherd hearing this announcement. What amazes you most about the birth of Jesus?
- Reflecting on this passage, what is one application you will follow today?
- Don't forget to make a financial gift for our Lottie Moon Christmas Offering (LMCO) with 100% of donations going to support international missionaries. www.spbcmd.com/give

DAY 25

Psalm 89:1-4 “I will sing of the LORD’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, ‘I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.’”

- How does this passage encourage your faith in Jesus?
- What is one insight that stood out to you in today’s sermon?
- Celebrate the birth of Christ with family and friends!

