



Light of the World Part 4 – Love

Pastor Ted Cunningham

In 2015, we did a Branson version of The Twelve Days of Christmas. Ever since then, people have been begging for me to do it again. Not true; not one person has asked for it again, but you're getting it anyway. With all of the gifts that 2020 brought us here in Branson, we thought we should take a moment just to recognize a few of them. So, I just put this little list together of 12 gifts we got.

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a twelve pack of Charmin Ultra Soft. Now I'm not going to sing it like we normally do, I'm just going to run through them. Eleven people at a family gathering get's you busted. Ten minutes late to the 10:00 am service thinking you'll still find a seat in the Castle, lying to the greeters. That was funnier at 8:30, but the conviction has sat in on that in this service. Nine months of Zoom call meetings. Eight legs on the strip. Seven final seasons. Yakov is like a going out of business sale that never ends. Six feet apart. Five go cart tracks. And they're voting on it today which will make us four trillion in stimulus added to the debt to burden our children. Three new supreme court justices. Two presidents elect. That was funnier than you lying to greeters. I appreciate that. It's the same sin people. And a mask mandate that has us all hating each other. So, that's the Twelve Days of Christmas and that's where we're going to jump in.

We're talking about love today. If you've ever wondered how pastors or teachers are trained, we're told that you're supposed to start a message with tension. So, whether you're going verse by verse through a book of the Bible or you're doing a topical series, you should identify the tension right up front and then spend the message working that out. 2020 has been a huge gift to preachers this year because we typically have to identify the tension, but not this year. This year, with all of the unrest politically, with the pandemic, racial tensions... There have been tensions. It's seems like every week something is added, or something changes, and we can know what the tension is.

There are two types of people... Again, these do not have names or faces; they really do not. I am not pointing out people. This is just two extremes that we see, as we talk about love and this part of Advent, looking forward to the Lord's return. These two extremes we're going to meet right here and the first one is **Christians hating those who don't think and act like Christians**. Today, we want to talk about what it means to love the people of the world but not embrace the systems, the values, the teachings of the world. Because that's the other extreme.

The other extreme that I see in the church today is **Christians who feel they need to embrace the values of the world to love the people of the world**. We're seeing this more and more. This week, a pastor was asked the question: "How come we don't hear sermons on hell anymore?"

“How come when we go to churches, everything is love, love, love, and there’s never ever a conversation about hell and people aren’t preaching about hell. I love what this pastor said. He quoted from that fiery Baptist preacher, Vance Havner. He preached on hell, trying to rescue people from it. One of his congregation members came up to him one Sunday and said, “I’m tired of all the messages on hell. I need you to preach more about the lowly, gentle Jesus. To which Vance Havner replied, “Where do you think I got all my information on hell?”

I know there are believers who are moving away from the doctrine or the teaching of our essential belief on hell, feeling they need to do that in order to love people. And they start reasoning. How can a loving God send anyone to hell? Today, we’re in John 3: 16. A loving God sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross for you so you don’t have to go to hell. Some are like, “If I’m going to love a family member or a friend who doesn’t embrace my theology, what I believe about gender, what I believe about marriage, I should change that, embracing the values of the world in order to love that person.” The answer is no you do not.

In Luke 2, we get this announcement. We’ve read it already in this season, but we focused on two parts. I want to look at another part of this passage today. It’s the angels announcing to the shepherds. ***10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news... the Messiah is born. ...that will cause great joy...”*** We like to focus a lot on the good news and the great joy, but today, we want to talk about “...***for all the people.***” We are a people of good news, a people of great joy and we are to be a people, follower of Jesus, who lives in the United States of America, and we’re to be a people for all the people.

This week, a part of the tension and the debate... Beth Moore sent out a tweet and it was her most responded to tweet. There were articles going out about it. She called out Christian nationalism. It’s just the fight begins. We can’t end 2020 without a good fight giving us something to talk about around the Christmas table. I saw people going against Christian nationalism. I get it. I understand that. But it’s the whole idea of patriotism that they were saying. I got this message of there was no love for the nation.

I just want to tell you it is perfectly okay for you to love your country. It’s perfectly okay for you to love your nation. If you applauded on that statement, you better applaud on this next one. It is not okay for you to love only your nation. You see what’s happening. Some are like nationalism, globalism... Listen, as a follower of Jesus, you’re to have a heart for the entire world. I’m to have a heart for the entire world. I can love my country and I can love the people of the world. Didn’t we sing this growing up? *“Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.”*

If you have your bibles, turn to John 3. We’re going to be in Verses 16-21 and we’re going to look at God’s heart for the world. I hope that today we all leave with a heart that is growing for the world. In a time of so much tension and outrage and frustration and bitterness, that we would be reminded, as a follower of Jesus, what we are called to do when it comes to loving neighbors, loving enemies, and loving each other.

John 3 – **16 For God so loved the world...** In your Bible, underline *world* or circle *world* because we're going to come back and look at that word a little bit when we get through this text. ***...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...***

Make sure we are very clear. We've talked about this. We are in between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. The first coming of Christ, Christ died, he offers the free gift of salvation, but make no mistake about it. We are now awaiting his second coming and at his second coming, he will come in judgement on those who did not receive his free gift of salvation at the first coming. ***...but to save the world through him.*** This is what John is saying in Verse 17 - ***For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world...*** This gospel is teaching us God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. This was the point of Jesus coming at the first Advent.

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned... This is the message we want for you at Christmas. We want you to hear and we want you to know that good news of Jesus Christ dying for your sins is that you can have salvation. This brings great joy and it is available to all, not a spiritual elite, not a certain people group. It's not privileged for one nation, it's for all the people. ***...but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.***

So, this is the verdict of Verses 16,17, and 18. **19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness...** We looked at this week one. We looked at the darkness that we tend to consult and then we continue to live in the darkness, but we need to turn to the light and the light clearly is Jesus. ***...instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.***

Let's look at that word *world* for just a moment. For God so loved the world... The Greek word is *cosmos*, and it means *order*. Just for a fun little fact, this is where we get our word *cosmetics*. I chuckled a little bit this week and I thought to myself, every time you put on cosmetics, you are bringing order to your face. So just think of that the next time... You're just bringing a little order.

Cosmos is used a couple of different ways in the New Testament. It's actually used 185 times in the new testament. One hundred and five of those times it is used by John. And 78 of those times is in this gospel, the Gospel of John. And 24 times in his epistles, and 3 times in the Book of Revelation. It has a couple of different thoughts behind it. The first one we clearly understand is God's creation. The *cosmos* is used to talk about God's creation. And you and I are called to enjoy God's creation and we're called to care for God's creation.

In John 3: 16, it's used to talk about the people of the world. Some commentaries would tell you it's both because you and I are created beings. So, that's how *cosmos* is used there. But there is another way we want to see it used today.

If you grew up like I did, in an independent, fundamental, pre-millennial, King James Version only Baptist church, we had a word called *worldliness*. We heard it all the time – worldliness. And this is what cosmos means in that respect. I got this straight from one of my favorite commentaries. *“It’s the evil, organized system under Satan, which operates through unbelieving people who are God’s enemies.”* I think you see this happening. I see it happening on a regular basis. Christians have all of this jumbled up. We’re not supposed to be allowing this into us. And the best way to not have this in us – the values of the world, the systems of the world – is to create attitude toward these people. You see the outrage online all the time – a desire to stand up for what you believe is a Christian nation finds you fighting with people and arguing and wanting to win against people instead of loving all of the people of the world and having a heart for people of the world as God has for the world.

We read about this in 1 John. This is another way that John uses it. ***15 Do not love the world or anything in the world.*** This is where we got that term and that idea of worldliness. We don’t want this in us. Why? ***If anyone loves the world...*** The ways of the world, the values of the world, the teaching of the world, what the world has to offer. ***...love for the Father is not in them.*** What is John saying? We know and rely on the love that God has for us. ***16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.***

Let’s put this in perspective that we all would really walk out understanding this is what it means. You and I are called **to hate the ways of the world, not the people of the world**. So, let’s make that the first distinction today. We’re to hate the ways of the world. We’re not to embrace the ways of the world. We’re not to walk in the ways of the world. We’re not to allow the ways of the world to influence us and help us make decisions for life, for work, for marriage, for family. So, you’ve heard it said, “Be in the world, but not of the world.”

I grew up not really getting that because I kind of grew up in a system, in a church that taught me to avoid the people of the world. The best way to keep the world away from you is don’t go to the world. We’re going to keep you here at church as much as possible. Don’t do sports. Don’t have friends in the neighborhood that could lead you astray. We need to understand we avoid the ways of the world, not the people of the world. I don’t cut the people out of my life. I want to see friends and family walking in light. Do you want to see your friends and family walking in light? Do you want to see your friends and family coming to faith in Jesus Christ? I do. And I want to be a witness to them, not avoiding them for fear of how they are going to influence me.

Jesus put it this way in John 15, John’s Gospel. ***18 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.*** I think this is part of the tension that we deal with. They’re coming at us. They hate our values. They don’t think like us, they don’t act like us, and they hate us for the way we think, and they want us to change the way we think, so there’s this hatred for us. Keep in mind, Jesus said, “It hated me first.” ***19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.*** You are here on a journey. This is temporary. This is for a short period of time, but this is not your home. This is not where you settle, so that tension is going to be there.

This is what Jesus was warning us would happen, but here's what he wasn't saying. Jesus warned us that the world would hate us. He wasn't telling us to hate or avoid the people of the world. That's not at all what he was speaking to.

So, let's look at what it means. If there's been one verse that has been quoted this year more than Philippians 4: 13 or Jeremiah 29:11, it has been, "Love your neighbor." You've seen it hashtag, hashtag, hashtag. I'm doing this because I love my neighbor. My family is doing this because we love our neighbors.

In Matthew 22, we get the Great Commandment. **34** *Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* Think through all the hundreds of laws. What would be the greatest?

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.'"* You've probably seen this more in 2020 than any other verse. And Jesus says in Verse 40, to sum this thought up. **40** *"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

What we've seen this year and what we need to be reminded of is there are a lot of different ways to love your neighbor. You love your neighbor in different ways than I love my neighbor and we could do some basic or general ones, but we're going to keep it pretty specific to 2020. So, this is a list. This isn't an exhaustive list. You might add something to it; you might take something away. We created a little bit of tension at the beginning and we're about ready to create more tension than we've had in a long time... So, here we go.

Loving your neighbor:

Wearing a mask. That's probably the primary hashtag you've seen with love your neighbor. "I wear a mask because I love my neighbor." What does that mean? "If I catch you in public not wearing a mask it's because you hate your neighbor." This is what's happening. "You either do it like I do it and that shows love. If you don't, oh, well, then you must not."

Canceling family gatherings. I'm going to keep it specific to our church. There are people in here who, because they love their family and friends, have decided because of the underlying health conditions, they would cancel a family gathering. That was one way to love their neighbors.

We had other people in here who said, "We are in no way, shape, or form canceling any family gathering because we think this could be the last one." I've been praying the Lord's return is between now and next year.

So, same issue handled two different ways. If I can argue, I think both people love their neighbors.

Regathering at church. This one... The weekend we were getting ready to gather as a church for the first time in May, a friend of mine went on the news and said, "We are not gathering for the rest of 2020 because we love our neighbors." I haven't seen him since. As soon as we get out of this pandemic, I'm going to punch him right in the face. In the loving, kind way. It won't be mean. But isn't that something? The very same week? I posted, "There are churches choosing not to gather in 2020 because they love their neighbors. We're gathering because we love our neighbors."

Posting on Blackout Tuesday. I did. You've heard me say... I've used the "take a knee" illustration a lot, saying I believe we need to listen. So, I posted a blackout screen and just wrote over it, "Listening screams you matter to me, you are valuable to me." Listening doesn't mean I agree with you; disagreeing with you doesn't mean I hate you; it just means you matter to me and that's why I'm going to listen. That very same day, I had a friend of mine, a strong believer in Christ, a leader for years in the church, who didn't post anything. He was going through a major surgery. He didn't have time to post anything. But then it started coming at him. "Why aren't you posting?" I used to think just posting got me in trouble, but now we live in a day and age where not posting is going to me in trouble. I'm just here to tell you there's a lot of ways to love your neighbors.

Bearing Arms. I'm going with this one because why not? We're in the Ozarks and a couple hundred of you in here have a gun right now. Did you know there are people in here that have a concealed weapon, #beausetheylovetheirneighbors. Do you know that? And there are those of you... And not many of you... I don't know how you'd ever find comfort at Woodland Hills Bass Pro Community Church, if you are anti-gun.

I can even go so far as to say we have folks in our church who have had friends, family members lose their lives getting in the middle of a neighbor's conflict trying to stop a fight and it cost them their lives. There are people who carry because they believe it's their responsibility to help protect people.

Some of you are going, "When you were going to give a list on loving your neighbor, why can't we just take cookies to them? Why'd you have to go there? Ted, what happened to the fruitcakes at Christmas; that's how we show love for our neighbors." This is just a small portion of 2020. I plead with you to get this next one.

Your way is one way to love your neighbor, but it is not the only way. There are a lot of different ways to love your neighbor.

I was accused in the summer of virtue signaling. Somebody came at me... I knew what it was, but I thought I better research it so I could be more effective at it. No, I haven't posted very much online lately because it's just been a very peaceful time. So, I went online, and I started researching. This is a basic definition of it. I'm sure there are a lot of different things you could add to this or take away from it. Here's just a working definition. If you Google it, this is what you'll read. "The action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments or actions (love your neighbor) intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue."

And what we've seen this year is "my position over yours. I'm doing this. I don't see you doing it, so you must not..." Wow, that's a pretty big leap. But here's the cool thing, Jesus speaks directly to this. you can't be more specific with how Jesus wants us to deal with virtue signaling.

In Matthew 6, Jesus says, **1** *"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others... Now, if you're wearing a mask to love your neighbor, obviously, we see that. We're going to see it; you just don't need to tell me about it all the time. You don't need to let everybody know how incredibly, morally correct you are. Jesus is saying if that's why you're practicing it and you want... **to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.** Why? Because the reward you were going after was to be seen by them. Jesus is saying if that's what you go into it for and that's what you get, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. In other words, love your neighbor and be very quiet about it. Go deliver a fruitcake and don't post it online.*

Amy and I joke about this quite a bit. When I do something nice for her around the house, I'll pause and go, "Should we get a video of this real quick? You might want to post this." If I say the right thing, I'm like, "Do you want to put that out on Twitter really quick. We want people to know how awesome I am." #husbandoftheyear. You laugh because you think that's ridiculous. But how many times a week do we do that? How many times have you done something kind, it wasn't captured, and you had to reenact it? You should use #reenactment. "It happened a few minutes ago but did have it captured for you and the world to see." Let's practice this this week. Let's love our neighbors and be very quiet about it.

Who are your neighbors? Your neighbors who are different than you. They can be difficult, they can be dangerous, they can be democrats, they can be republicans. They don't look like you, they don't think like you, they don't talk like you.

Why don't we **love someone this week who doesn't love us back?** Some of you are in that marriage right now. You need to love someone who doesn't love you back. How about this? **Care for someone who couldn't care less about you.** That may take place around the Christmas table this week on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Where Jesus is going to take us next. **Love someone who hates you.** Hate the values of the world; don't embrace the values of the world, no way. But while doing that, we love the people of the world.

In Matthew 5, Jesus said, **43** *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" That just makes sense. But Jesus says, **44** "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Now watch what he says. **46** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Meaning it doesn't take work to love a lovable person. It doesn't take work at a family gathering to grab that cousin or that aunt or that uncle that you get along with and go, "Let's just go over to the corner and have our own little conversation." That's easy. That doesn't take work it doesn't take skill.*

Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47 And if you greet only your own people..."** We've said this. It's racism to love only your people. That doesn't mean you can't love your people. Love your people, but don't just only love your people. Love all the people of the world.

“...what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” In other words, **there is no skill required in loving easy to love people.**

What we're talking about today – loving our neighbors, loving our enemies, and now loving each other during this season of 2020. I have my political opinions and I share a few and I talk to friends individually. I've done less of that online because it's just the hostility. I'm just wanting to practice everything we've been preaching of peace and hope and joy and love, everything that Advent is supposed to be teaching us and everything we're supposed to be waiting for.

My heart... This just me, so, again, there are lots of ways to do this and I know some of you have God's calling to do other things. But my heart has not been *how do we unite America?* I just don't know how to do that, I don't feel I have the skills for that, and I don't believe God has called me to do that. You may have a passion different than mine. I really, as soon as it hit... I don't think it was a decision I made. I just felt called by God, during this season, that we have to be a local church. We have to minister to the needs of our local community, local congregation.

And then the division started. In 2020, it's the mask. I'm telling you in 2021 on that list will be the vaccine. "I'm not getting the vaccine." Some are like, "I'm getting the vaccine because it's not just about me; it's about my neighbors and developing immunity around the..." So, it's going to be just like in marriage, right? The issue changes, but the same underlying issues are there. We're going to have new things to deal with. I just watch brothers and sisters in Christ going at it with each other.

There are people in here that voted like me and there are people in here who call on the name of Jesus who didn't vote like me. Some of you are like, "Camp out on that for a while." Bring it down a notch. What I'm asking you to do is love someone who didn't vote like you. Love someone who abstained from voting because of their conscience. Love someone who has a completely different opinion when the president or president elect's name pops up at Christmas.

My concern has been believers in the church. We have people who are tuning in from Germany and there are people who are tuning in from Tanzania. We have people tuning in from all over the country and we're glad you're tuning in and we love you. I don't know how to do discipleship or fellowship at a distance. I don't think it's something God has called me to, so I'm not excluding you; I'm just saying locally... But this applies to all of us. Church at home and here. Loving one another when we go at each other over the issues because the issues aren't going to stop going into 2021.

In John 13, Jesus said... Remember his prayer is for us to be one. "Father, as you and I are one, make them one." Here's how you'll be known as a disciple of Jesus. Jesus said, ***34 "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."***

What homework for us today. What a great opportunity for us to begin practicing, for us to be challenged. How are we loving our neighbors? And we're going beyond cookies and cupcakes. We're talking about the big issues that we disagree on. Who will we serve this week? Who will we care for? Who will we be kind with? Who will we be patient without posting online what we just did? Who will

we practice love with this week? Here in the church... and that's why we said if you have a need, we want to help meet that need. If you just need a little something to help get through the season, this is why the church body comes together.

We read about it in Acts 2 and Acts 4. All believers shared everything in common. We didn't hold our stuff to say this is about ours. You haven't earned it; you need to work... We're here to help one another. We have practical, tangible ways of practicing what Jesus is giving us in this new command today. We can love one another, we can reach out. This is why we say to be generous. If you haven't given yet in the offering, give today so that someone in here who has been struggling through this season...

I'm looking at friends right now who haven't worked all year. They're just in a profession that's a very challenging profession. They've picked up odd jobs here and there, but I know it's been a struggle for them. They've been deemed non-essential. Don't go have a conversation with them about essential vs non-essential. No. Love them. Meet their needs. Care for them. Listen to them. Reach out to them. When it says we're to love the people of the world, this is talking about all the people of the world. We have the good news which brings great joy for all the people. And that we would practice this by loving our neighbors, our enemies, and each other. That is my prayer this week as we head into 2021. I hope you have a merry Christmas.

I'm going to invite you to pray with me and we're going to end with a special song because I don't think you can end a Christmas service without country music. Can I get an amen on that one? Somebody says, "Ted, there are other genres of music." But to be very fair, my wife found this song and wants it. If you remember from the CMA Award, which I'm sure everyone watched. This song struck a chord with me and so they're going to close with that.

Father, make us one as a church. As we talk about Jesus being sent into the world to die for the sins of the world, I pray for the one right now that is lost and living in darkness that today would be the day they confess their sins, repent of their way, of their system, of them believing what the world and the darkness has kept them in, that they would come into the light and they would trust Jesus as their Lord and Savior. That today would be the day they place faith alone in Christ alone. That they would confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead.

I am grateful for this church, I'm grateful for this community. May we be a church family known for hope, peace, joy, and love for all the people. May we always, not just from here, but through the missionaries that we support, be continuing to go and send and give money and resources to those who have given their lives to a foreign field so that the good news can go out to our neighbors around the world. May we have a love a country, but may we also have a love for all the nations of the world.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.