



A FIVE-PART CHRISTMAS
DEVOTIONAL

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Are You Feelin' It?: Love

Let's face it, we live in a love-saturated culture. Everywhere you turn you see television shows, movies, magazines, books, and other products all designed to get us to buy/watch/read by appealing to our desire to tap into love. It's especially bad in our music. While I don't have the exact number, the great majority of songs on the radio have to do with some aspect of love. Can you identify these famous love songs from their lyrics

- Bittersweet memories that is all I'm taking with me So good-bye Please don't cry We both know I'm not what you, you need....

How about:

- There's a calm surrender To the rush of day When the heat of the rolling world Can be turned away An enchanted moment And it sees me through It's enough for this restless warrior Just to be with you...

Too easy, right? One last one - and a personal favorite of mine!

- Shot through the heart and you're to blame, darlin'!

Of course you know this one!

But when it comes to love, this world has the wrong perspective. Most of the "love" in this world comes down to "what you do for me" - it's about how you make me feel. Because of this erroneous view, the emotional connections we have make it too easy to move on. When I don't feel love for you I'm gonna walk away.

But real love doesn't move on in difficult moments – it holds on and fights for the “other.”

If the world's perspective is wrong, let's take a look at the Bible's perspective. One of the most famous chapters in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 13. It's often called "The Love Chapter." In this section Paul goes on...and on...and on...and, well, you get it - all about LOVE.

Here's the kicker: he uses verbs, not adjectives, to talk about love. Love is something to be DONE, not something to be felt. Here it is broken down with a bit of explanation about what Paul is trying to get at.

- *Love is patient* – it performs the positive act of waiting
- *Love is kind* – it responds to others with a tender heart
- *Love does not envy* – there are no intense negative feelings over another's success
- *Love is not boastful* – not a pompous windbag
- *Love is not conceited* – not puffed up. Puffing up the self puts others down
- *Love does not act improperly* – refers to shameful behavior
- *Love is not selfish* – doesn't seek personal advantage over the "other"
- *Love is not provoked* – doesn't get caught up or riled up, not irritable
- *Love does not keep a record of wrongs* – don't get historical!
- *Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth* – treat each other fairly
- *Love bears all things* – protects and covers up what is displeasing in others
- *Love believes all things, hopes all things* – trusting in God's care and protection
- *Love endures all things* – love doesn't bail out when times get tough
- *Love never ends* – despite trouble, hardship, or affliction, love perseveres

Jesus' take on love is even more extreme. It's not just about action - it's about selfless action.

- John 15:13 – this is the greatest act of love, putting others ahead of yourself to the extreme.
- John 15:17 – Jesus' direct command: love each other.

As we start the advent season we often focus on the wrong type of love. Love in Advent isn't about feeling that it's the most wonderful time of the year. It's recognizing that God loves us through His actions. He cares, so He acts accordingly. Christ coming to the world is the greatest act of love because it is putting our needs as His priority.

The flip-side to this Christmas miracle is that we are commanded to pick up and carry this definition of love! We have the opportunity to create God's kingdom on earth, and it all starts with love – how we treat and prioritize others.

Not to be trite and cliché, but what the world needs now is love. Not a schmaltzy, Coca-Cola version but a godly, biblical version of love as concrete behavior that puts others first and puts ourselves second.

I Want to Be Happy: Joy

Everybody WANTS to be happy. Everybody WANTS joy. It's the number one reason the little book *The Secret* has sold more than 19 million copies worldwide and has been translated into 46 languages.

In a nutshell the secret comes down to this - if you want good things to come to you then you have to put good things out into the universe. If you want happiness and joy you've got to put good vibes out there. But it's bunk. It's garbage. There is no universal return on good vibes.

But we want happiness SO badly!

So we play this "if only" game in which we tell ourselves, "If only I had _____ then that would make me happy..." Yet for all of our "unhappiness" we've really got a ton of stuff. Did you ever wonder how we can be so blessed and so unhappy at the same time?

There are four lies we tell ourselves when it comes to our pursuit of happiness. See if you recognize any that you've told yourself.

1. *God is withholding from me* – this was Adam and Eve's big problem; they thought that God was holding out something better – they compared the life they had with what they thought they could have if God wasn't holding out...

2. *God owes me* – I put in my time, I'm in church, I tithe, I do my best to forgive people when they are rude to me.... I've done my bit – why doesn't God reward me?

3. *If I get it, I'll be happy* (this is that game we talked about a minute ago). But this is a flawed way of thinking. Prosperity and contentment don't always go together. Rich people are unhappy, too. I'm reminded of an old joke:

They say money can't buy happiness, but I'd rather cry in a mansion...

But many times when our circumstances change our discontent changes along with them! We are unhappy at one level and unhappy at the next level (and on and on it goes).

4. I know what is best for me - this is one of the biggest lies most of us use, even if we don't realize it. We get into trouble when we try to plot our own course to happiness rather than following God's course to contentment. But contentment isn't about controlling ourselves. Self-denial doesn't equal contentment – contentment is inward and cannot be touched by circumstances, can't be stolen by sickness or poverty, cannot be ruined by the loss of a job, friends, or house. Though I HATE the cliché, this is one of those areas where we need to "let go and let God."

So then where can we find true contentment?

In Philippians 4:4-13 the Apostle Paul writes:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things. Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it. I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Paul isn't crazy; he says it twice - rejoice! But notice this; what gives Paul joy is not things or circumstances. It's Paul's relationship with God gave him a sense of contentment that transcended his immediate circumstances. He was a man who knew what it was like to be in the pits. He "walked through the valley of the shadow of death." Shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten, and on and on - still he maintains contentedness because of his relationship with God.

The book of Isaiah tells us that we were made with a purpose – for God's glory! Discontentment begins when we put ourselves at the center of the universe and remove God. It's a big view of

me and a very little view of God. Christian joy, on the other hand, is independent of all things on earth BECAUSE it has its source in the continual presence of Christ – not on temporary things or circumstances.

No matter what your circumstance this holiday season you can recover your joy – but we need a commitment to contentment. Contentment is a disposition of the heart that freely and joyfully submits to God’s will, whatever that will may be. It’s easy to submit when God’s will involves large amounts of cash, perfect health, exotic vacations, or unlimited vanilla chai lattes. But a commitment to contentment embraces both prosperity and pain as from the hand of God.

Finally, here are four practical tips you can start using right now to start recovering your joy:

- 1. Ignore the lies of pursuing happiness.***
- 2. Live with a “Jesus is enough” mentality.***
- 3. Count your blessings (really, write them down).***
- 4. Focus on helping others who are even less fortunate than you.***

May you have a blessed holiday season.

Fakers, Breakers, and Makers: Peace

The next Advent theme we're talking about peace, but I wanted to take a different approach to it. I want to talk about peace from the perspective of personal conflict. Sure, we could talk about the peace that we have in Jesus. We could sing "Silent Night" and fool ourselves into thinking that a manger with a newborn baby was calm, serene, and peaceful.

The fact of the matter is that the peace that God gives us is supposed to play out in our interactions with others. As we have received peace (Jesus said "My peace I give to you) we are called to be peace makers in this world.

When Christians learn to live out the gospel in the conflicts of daily life, people are more willing to admit their shortcomings and ask for help before a crisis occurs. Families are better equipped to handle disputes, which makes divorce less likely. Members are encouraged to go to each other to discuss problems instead of letting them fester. When peace rules our hearts and our lives, we refuse to let conflict win the day.

Here are some major sources of conflict in our lives - things that can destroy peace.

- *misunderstanding or poor communication*
- *differences in values, goals, priorities, expectations, or opinions*
- *competition*
- *sinful attitudes or behavior: the Bible says, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (James 4:1)*

Take an honest look at yourself. Have any (or all!) of these things stolen your peace this year? Perhaps it was someone else's fault. Perhaps it was your own. But this kind of conflict isn't supposed to dominate our lives.

NOT ALL CONFLICT IS BAD! Our response, though, can turn neutral or positive conflict into bad conflict. Conflict is an opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God in our lives. Here are some common ways we respond:

PEACE-FAKERS (What?! There's no conflict!)

- Denial: One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that it does not exist. Or, if we cannot deny that the problem exists, we simply refuse to do what should be done to resolve a conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (1 Samuel 2:22-25).

- Flight: Another way to escape from a conflict is to run away. This may include leaving the house, ending a friendship, quitting a job, filing for divorce, or changing churches. In most cases, running away only postpones a proper solution to a problem, so flight is usually a harmful way to deal with conflict. Flight may also be a legitimate response in seriously threatening circumstances, such as cases of physical or sexual abuse. If a family is involved in such a situation, however, every reasonable effort should still be made to find trustworthy assistance and come back to seek a lasting solution to the problem.
- Suicide: When people lose all hope of resolving a conflict, they may seek to escape the situation (or make a desperate cry for help) by attempting to take their own lives. Suicide is never the right way to deal with conflict.

PEACE-BREAKERS (I'd rather fight to remove conflict than to work it out)

- Assault: Some people try to overcome an opponent by using various forms of force or intimidation, such as verbal attacks (including gossip and slander), physical violence, or efforts to damage a person financially or professionally. Such conduct always makes conflicts worse.
- Litigation: Another way to force people to bend to our will is to take them to court. Lawsuits damage relationships and often fail to achieve complete justice. When Christians are involved on both sides, their witness can be severely damaged. This is why Christians are commanded to settle their differences within the church rather than in the civil courts (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Therefore, it is important to make every effort to settle a dispute out of court whenever possible (Matt. 5:25-26).
- Murder: In extreme cases, people may be so desperate to win a dispute that they will try to kill those who oppose them. While most Christians would not actually kill someone, we should never forget that we stand guilty of murder in God's eyes when we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (see 1 John 3:15; Matt. 5:21-22).

Neither the PEACEFAKER or the PEACEBREAKER is the biblical way to respond to conflict. So how would God have us do it?

PEACEMAKERS (the godly model)

- Overlook an offense. Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly and deliberately overlooking an offense. "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11; see also 12:16; 17:14; Col. 3:13; 1 Peter 4:8). Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness or anger.
- Reconciliation: If an offense is too serious to overlook or has damaged the relationship, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. "[If] your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled" (Matt. 5:23-24; see Prov. 28:13).

- Negotiation: Even if we successfully resolve relational issues, we may still need to work through material issues related to money, property, or other rights. This should be done through a cooperative bargaining process in which you and the other person seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side.
- Mediation: If two people cannot reach an agreement in private, they should ask one or more objective outside people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. "If he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16).
- Accountability: If a person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands church leaders to formally intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness: "If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17). Direct church involvement is often viewed negatively among Christians today, but when it is done as Jesus instructs—lovingly, redemptively, and restoratively—it can be the key to saving relationships and bringing about justice and peace.

That's all well and good, but how do we get to a place where we can be that kind of peacemaker? Ultimately it comes down to forgiveness. It is nearly impossible to truly forgive others in your own strength, especially when they have hurt you deeply or betrayed your trust. There is only one way to overcome these barriers; that is to admit that you cannot forgive in your own strength and that you desperately need God to come in and change your heart.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is an act of the will. Forgiveness involves a series of decisions, the first of which is to call on God to change our hearts. Second, forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgetting is a passive process in which a matter fades from memory merely with the passing of time. Forgiving is an active process; it involves a conscious choice and a deliberate course of action. To put it another way, when God says that he "remembers your sins no more" (Isa. 43:25), he is not saying that he cannot remember our sins. Rather, he is promising that he will not remember them. When he forgives us, he chooses not to mention, recount, or think about our sins ever again. Similarly, when we forgive, we must draw on God's grace and consciously decide not to think or talk about what others have done to hurt us.

To forgive someone means to release him or her from liability to suffer punishment or penalty. In his book "The Peace Maker," Ken Sande talks about forgiveness being described as a decision to make four promises:

1. "I will not dwell on this incident."
2. "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."
3. "I will not talk to others about this incident."
4. "I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."

It's not easy...

When we think about the forgiveness that the ultimate PEACEMAKER gave to us at Christmas, we should be motivated to extend forgiveness and peace towards others. This holiday season, be a peacemaker. Let forgiveness be an overwhelming theme of your life.

May you know the peace of God that surpasses understanding, and may you offer that peace to others.

A Light Up Ahead: Hope

Our world really misunderstands hope. Often people see it as a desire for something to happen. One of my favorite examples of this kind of hope is in Antiques Roadshow. You know the show – people bring in old stuff and “hope” that their old item actually has high value. What they are really looking for is the promise of new life – clearly the old isn’t amounting to much – it’s junk, or of little value. They want to reinvigorate the item with new life and value!

Can you imagine the excitement of taking something old and being given new value?! Are we any different? In our own search for hope that’s what we really want – new life and value. That is what hope does – it instills life, value, and purpose into a person.

Conversely, hopelessness is when a person has no desire for what the future holds – he sees no possibilities. In the classic movie Showboat one character sings the famous song “Ole Man River” in which we find the lines: “I get weary and sick of tryin’. I’m tired of livin’ but scared of dyin’.” This is the epitome of hopelessness – I don’t wanna be here and I’ve got nothing coming down the road.

More of us feel that way than we care to admit. We have that same fleeting thought: I’m tired of livin’ but scared of dyin’. But so long as man has a future he has hope. The Bible declares:

Proverbs 23:17b-18 ~ ...fear the Lord. For then you will have a future, and your hope will never fade.

Proverbs 24:14 ~ Realize that wisdom is [sweet like honey] for you. If you find it, you will have a future, and your hope will never fade.

Even in the secular world, when people stop having anything to look forward to they lose hope and the vigor of life. What happens when the things we look forward to are things of this world? Eventually they come and go. Then what happens to hope? The only future that leads to perpetual hope is that future when Christ returns and we spend all eternity in the presence of God. In a classic hymn we sing these words, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood

and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

But hope is not a mere pipe dream. Hope is a human response to God's activity

Romans 4:18-20 ~ Against hope, with hope he believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what had been spoken: So will your descendants be. He considered his own body to be already dead since he was about 100 years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb, without weakening in the faith. He did not waiver in unbelief at God's promise, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.

This, then, is the essence of hope. It is not mere desire for something to happen – hope is unshakable confidence, and expectation that God is actively present in my life and in this world and in the world to come! Because hope is about confidence and expectation of God's activity, hope is strengthened, not weakened, in the face of adversity and difficulty. The world sees Christian hope as foolishness and something fleeting. In reality our hope, our understanding that God has a future and a plan, is the bedrock and foundation of our Christian confidence!

So what?

Hope is always a great place to start something new because hope is something that looks to the future with optimism. We have hope that one day Jesus will come back again and make everything right. We have hope that the way it is, is not how it is supposed to be. We have hope that no matter what life throws at us, we know the end result, we know who wins.

The holiday season is rough for many because the world throws out its version of hope. Warm fires, families that love each other, and stuff, stuff, stuff. The wonderful image of Christmas we see in ads fails to live up to reality. But no matter what our circumstances, no matter if it's the holiday season or any other season, we can hold on to a hope that lasts. The Savior came once into the world and He's coming again someday. No matter what we face now – God controls my destiny and my future. It is unshakable. No one can take it away.

Where human hope dies away – Godly hope perseveres to the end!

From Christmas to the Cross

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. From that moment on God was not satisfied simply to have started the human story – He wanted to be part OF the human story. He walked and talked with Adam and Eve.

He brought Noah and his family through the waters. He led Abraham away from his home in order to start a new nation

And when God’s people found themselves in desperate times, prisoners in Egypt, God sent Moses to lead them out of slavery and back to the land God promised them. But the people walked away from God and returned to slavery. This time it wasn’t with real chains and prisons ***humanity became slaves to our own sin and brokenness***. Once again, God needed to step in, be part OF the story, and bring a new Moses – a new Savior to lead people out of slavery and back to Him.

The prophet Isaiah said ~ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel which means “God is with us”.

So the world waited for the new Moses, leading a new Exodus, bringing people back to God. But God has a quirky sense of humor. When we expect wisdom God uses foolishness. When we expect strength God uses weakness. And from an unexpected place the story unfolds.

The prophet Micah said ~ But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Once again God becomes intricately involved as part OF the human story. He is not a far and distant God but is among us. The Messiah is Son of God but is also Son of Man.

When his mother Mary had been legally pledged to be married to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. A Divine Pregnancy. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce Mary quietly. But as he considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel commanded.

Can you imagine being in Joseph's place? Thomas H. Troeger once wrote:

*The hands that first held Mary's child were hard from working wood
From boards they sawed and nailed and filed and splinters they withstood
This day they gripped no tool of steel they drove no iron nail
But cradled from the head to heel our Lord, newborn and frail*

*When Joseph marveled at the size of that small breathing frame
And gazed upon those bright new eyes and spoke the infant's name
The angel's voice he once had dreamed poured out from heaven's height
And like the host of stars that gleamed blessed earth with welcome light*

*This Child will be Emmanuel - not God upon a throne
But God-with-us, Emmanuel - As close as blood and bone
The tiny form in Joseph's palms confirmed what he had heard
And from his heart rose hymns and psalms for heaven's human Word*

*The tools which Joseph laid aside a mob would later lift
And use with anger, fear and pride to crucify God's gift
Let us, O Lord, not only hold the Child who's born today
But charged with faith, may we behold to follow in His way.*

This newborn king is not just for some. He is born to be king of all; regardless of nation, gender, wealth or poverty. He is the King of both the low and exalted. When this little king held court his royal attendants were shepherds AND kings! But why? What's the point of this baby king? What's it REALLY about? Recalling God's plan from the beginning, The Gospel of John tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

For 1600 years God's people had waited for the Messiah, the Chosen One to lead people back to God. That's why the baby king came. Not to be a cute baby – but to bring light to the dark world.

But the darkness didn't go away quietly. Instead, it fought back, taking the life of the this Messiah, this King, this light of the world. It wasn't a surprise to this king – he knew what had to be done.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed...

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Why did God decide to become part of our story? Why come as an infant king only to die? It was for us, that we might have a new life with God. He was born to give US life. Jesus said:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Christmas is great. Baby Jesus is great. Family and friends are great. Giving and getting gifts is great. But that's not what Christmas is about.

Christmas is about our chance to have a new life - to have a fresh start and leave our brokenness behind us and to experience eternity in the presence of God. Because Christmas to the Cross is all about how much God loves us.

Merry Christmas!