

I have to be honest with you — we've entered another Advent and Christmas season — and while I never get tired of telling you the Christmas story — it gets harder every year to tell you the same story. It is the most marvelous story of love — the love that God had for his people — summarized in some of the most familiar words of Scripture such as John 3:16 *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

We know the Christmas story by heart — or we should — we hear it in song... we hear it read... we see it printed in a variety of places, such as Christmas cards. All you have to do is watch a *“A Charlie Brown Christmas”* where we have Linus reading the Christmas story in response to Charlie Brown's question as to what is the real meaning of Christmas.

Yes, I know that there are many who have not heard the Christmas story or who do not believe the Christmas story — and now is good time to emphasize what the real meaning of Christmas is to those people who celebrate Christmas without recognizing the real meaning of Christmas — without knowing, if you will — the Christ of Christmas. It is the ideal time to those who celebrate Christmas from a secular point of view — to say — have you really thought about what you are celebrating?? It's much more than Black Friday, Santa Claus and some gifts, carols, decorations and Christmas cheer.

But what about us — what about those of us who are familiar with the real meaning of Christmas — those of us who know the real meaning in our celebration? Where do we go from here? Today, I'd like us to consider some of the personal results of the season — that is, what do the events that we celebrate mean to us — how does it impact our lives. We know the story... we believe the story... we are thankful for the story... what effect has this story of love had on our lives? We celebrate the birth of Jesus — what do we do with it?? Where do we go with it??

Turn with me to our Epistle lesson for this day — Romans 13 — we will be looking at verses 8-10. From the very beginning, there have been many shots taken against Christians. People have tried to destroy us... discredit us ... belittle us ... call us ignorant or weak ... etc. But despite this, there is the unescapable fact that the world is a better place because of Christianity. In just about every area of life, the world is a better place because of the influence of Christians... beginning with those first century Christians.

Think just about a few areas — art and architecture — some of the most beautiful artwork has been done in the name of Christ... sculptures... paintings... etc. Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world have been constructed because of Christ. But not only beautiful buildings, but other buildings — sometimes very plain — built to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ, such as hospitals, missions for the homeless and orphanages.

Then we think of the area of music — much of the most beautiful music in all of history has been composed by Christians for the church to the glory of God. Think of all the church music that Bach wrote, with the inscription on each piece – Sola Deo Gloria – to the Glory of God Alone! And just listen to the magnificent words and music of Messiah by Handel – with it’s complete libretto entirely from the Scriptures set to magnificent music.

Then consider the world of literature — without the works by Christian authors, the world would be a poorer place indeed. And I’m sure that you can think of other examples.

And then we think of something more personal — health. The first hospitals were built by Christians — many of the missionaries that have gone out in the name of Christ, have gone out as medical missionaries — healing the body and looking for opportunities to heal the soul with the good news of Jesus Christ. We can go one and on — but I would hate to think of a world without the influence of Christianity and individual Christians. A world without Christ and those influenced by him would not be a very pleasant place — to say the least.

All one needs to do is to look at the countries and societies that do not have this influence and you will see what I mean — look at many of the Arab nations, China, parts of Africa, India, Pakistan, parts of Asia, parts of South America — and you see that Christianity has truly been a blessing in the world — because of the influence of Christians. As Christians live out their lives — in obedience to God’s word — as much as they can — they become an positive influence on the people around them in every aspect of life — politically, socially and even economically.

One of the ways that this is carried out is through obedience to what we see in our Epistle lesson — Romans 13:8-10 (READ). These words are nothing new. Every week during our worship you hear what is known as the great commandment — Matthew 22:37-39: where Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment in the law and we read: “*Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "*”

What we see here in Romans 13 is simply a restating of the 2nd half of this great commandment — and it is simply what Jesus said: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*” Now again, this is nothing new — God’s people have always been required to do this. (The first part of the great commandment is from Deuteronomy 5:5 — this is what Jesus was quoting: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*”) And the 2nd part is from Leviticus 19:18, which says in part: “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself:*”

So we must ask — what is involved in loving your neighbor?? Again, we see that the scriptures are its own best interpreter. We see right before us what is involved in this — and again — it is nothing new. But first we must define who is our neighbor?? We are

familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10, where Jesus answered the question of the lawyer who asked *"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* Our Savior's answer was to ask him what was written in the law, to which the lawyer responded: *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,"* and *'your neighbor as yourself.'*"

But then the lawyer asked: *"And who is my neighbor?"* To which Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan — thereby defining that our neighbor is just about anyone that we come into contact with — even people we don't like — we are to love them.

The interesting part in all of this is that this has been a consistent command throughout the Scriptures — God's people are to love our neighbors as ourselves. There is no question about it — and there is no option for us. Unfortunately, even among Christians this is not always true — we don't always love our neighbor as our selves. This is not to say that we have to agree with our neighbor on everything — just simply that we have to love them.

And if we do that — then we will be fulfilling the law of God. The Apostle Paul puts it more specifically here in our passage in Romans. Consider that he says — 13:9 (READ). When we think about these more specifically we see how true love for our neighbor — and again, that is anyone that we come in contact with — we see that true love will not do any of these things.

First we see that it will not "commit adultery" — which is any type of sexual relations outside of marriage. Now, think about all the hurt, heartache and emotional distress that is caused in people's lives by those who commit adultery. That is why God said what He said. True love will not do this. But remember also that Jesus said in Matthew 5:28: *"But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* So we see again, that it is what is in the heart that counts.

One cannot watch the evening news or read the newspaper without see the report of a murder — because someone has broken this commandment — *"you shall not murder."* We see again all the hurt and distress and the lives ruined that is caused by disobedience to this commandment.

But again, it is not just a matter of the act — but of the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus again said these words in Matthew 5:21-22: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' 'But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.* We need to think about what is in our hearts towards our neighbor — because anger at our brother without a cause is murder in the heart.

"You shall not steal" — this goes on all the time — people taking what is not theirs... people taking something from someone else. But this is not just bank robbery or stealing

a candy bar and the like — but also things such as not giving our employers a full days work for our pay... or something that is prevalent today among students — going on the Internet and “buying” their research papers. There is also stealing from God — not giving him what is due to him — our worship, our time and our tithes. And there are other examples — but true love for our neighbor does not steal in any way.

“You shall not bear false witness.” — We’ve just come through the election season — where the breaking of this commandment was in great supply! How many commercials were on the air and the mailings that we received and what part of what they said was not true?

“You shall not covet” — don’t look at what your neighbor has — and want it. The reverse is should be true — be satisfied with what you have — be thankful for what you have.

Notice then what Paul says — *“... and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* We love God with all our heart and soul and mind — and we love our neighbor as our selves — this fulfills the law of God.

If we think about — as hard as we might try — we can’t do it — we cannot keep these commandments perfectly. It is impossible. And they are not multiple choice commandments — we cannot keep 3 out 5 or 6 out of 10 and say we are doing pretty good. This my friends is the very reason for the season.

This is why there is Jesus — this is why there was the birth of the Savior... this is why we celebrate the birth. Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law — but we couldn’t do it — making the need for Jesus a necessity. This is why we have Christmas... this is why we celebrate it — and why it plays such an important part in our lives.

But the other thing is that for those in Christ — those who know the Christ of Christmas — while we cannot keep these words perfectly — we can certainly do a much better “job of it” if you will than the non-Christian — because we have the Spirit of Christ living within us. The Spirit that will enable us to better love our neighbor as ourselves.

So, as we think about this Christmas season — let us be thankful... thankful first that we know the Christ of Christmas... and thankful, that by his spirit we can live a life more obedient to him. And as Christians love — as Christ has loved us — the world will be a better place from a temporal point of view — and our love for our neighbor can be the means of leading others to the Christ of Christmas.