

Love BIG  
Loving Like God  
Christmas Series for 2018  
"UnConditional"  
1 Timothy 1:15-17  
December 2, 2018

This year we want to celebrate the enormous nature of God's love for us. At Christmas we recognize the extravagance of God's love for all humanity. So much so that Jesus would come to earth to be born like us, live like us, die for us so that the things that separate us from God would be demolished. The mercy of God made a way for us to be saved. That's how God love's us in BIG ways.

My first visit to the Holy Land was in 1981. I was all of 19 years old and I was there because of your tax dollars. Yep, that's right, you paid my way to Israel. I was aboard the USS Iwo Jima as a part of a helicopter detachment of the 6<sup>th</sup> fleet. We were on a 7-month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea and a part of the tour was a six-day doc in Haifa, Israel to refuel and resupply. We were given opportunities, as a part of our shore leave, to take bus trips to see the sights. **[Pic of the Shepherd's Field]** So, I took two bus tours that took me to the holy sights like Megiddo, the Mount of Transfiguration, Masada, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. I remember that first trip to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Shepherd's Fields of Bethlehem and the streets of that city.

What I remember the most was not the sites I saw but, what I felt. **[Pic of the Church of the Nativity]** I remember standing in front of the spot where it is believed that Jesus was born. I felt the overwhelming presence of God reminding me that He sent His Son for me. I looked around and realized that I was in a small room with a big crowd and thought to myself...what about everyone else? I clearly remember God saying to me...yes, them too but, I want you to know that I came for you because I love you. I remember walking up out of that small cave area in the Church of the Nativity with a tear running down my face. As a 19-year-old Marine, God took the time to remind me of just how much He loves me, unconditionally.

An important part of the Christmas season is that we reminded of God's message of extravagant love for the human beings He created. Our heavenly Father created each one of us by His own hands and is deeply, wonderfully in love with us. From the very beginning of time God has been in love with all that He created. Yep, that means every plant and animal, every mountain and star, every dinosaur and every person who has ever been created. God loves us all. Don't ask me how God does it...that's part of the mystery and majesty of who God is. And what I find extraordinary is that God continues to love us, unconditionally, in spite of the fact that we are not on track with God's plan for our lives. The Bible reminds us that we are all off track with what God wants for His creation. Because we are imperfect and we create imperfect things...**all of us need God's love and forgiveness in our lives.** Christmas is the start of God's final plan to fix the separation that exists between us and our Heavenly Father.

That separation happened a really long time ago. You can read about it in the very first book of the Bible – Genesis. The story starts there and begins its climax at Christmas when God sent His Son to save us. Go back to 1 Tim 1:15 with me ***<sup>15</sup> This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..."*** The message of Christmas is this, God loves us so much that He would send his Son into the world to love us, save us from ourselves and our sin, and bridge the gap between our imperfection and His perfection. **[Pic of Nativity scene]**

Here's the human problem...we are not perfect and there is a vast distance between us and God. God is perfect, incapable of making a mistake or messing things up. You and me, we are so far from perfection. The gap between who we are in our thoughts and actions and words and who God is can be ridiculous at times...right. So, there is no way we can ever bridge the gap between us and perfection by ourselves...we will surely mess it up. So, the only way it could happen is if God, the perfect one, bridged the gap for us. Christmas is about how **God loves us in a BIG way by sending His Son** to bridge the gap between our imperfection and His perfection so that we could be with Him for all eternity. First Timothy 1:16 says: ***But God had mercy on me...*** That statement is what *Loving BIG* is all about. This series of messages is all about the extravagance of God's love for us, that while we were deep in our imperfection, God chose to come and be with us, Emmanuel. That perfection chose to come and live among the imperfect all because of love. That God thought you and I were worth it.

To show us that love – God chose some pretty significant symbols. As a way to say that God's love is for everyone, that it's BIG enough to reach every person, God came at a specific time in history and in very specific ways through very specific people. **[Pic of Nativity]** We see the enormous nature of God's love at Christmas as God uses common people like

Mary and Joseph to usher in the plan for salvation. Joseph was a carpenter in a small town that most people thought would ever produce anything good. Mary was a young girl. Most likely not very educated or savvy to the ways of the world. What both of them exhibited was faith and a desire to obey God. With those two things in each of us, God can still love the world in BIG ways. That means that we too can come close to God and through us, God can do significant things. **By sending His love to us through ordinary people like us, God told us that we too can love BIG.**

But God does not stop there. God uses outcasts like shepherds to announce to the rest of the world what has happened in Bethlehem. Those guys outside of town who were often seen as the undesirables to the people in town were the very ones God brings the message of Jesus' birth to first. God's extravagant love came to people who most likely didn't believe they were worthy of God's love at all, let alone being given the opportunity to be the first evangelists of this good news. Angels filled the sky to proclaim the birth of the One who came for all, that's God loving BIG. Those of us today who don't feel worthy, don't feel up to the task, don't feel included or don't feel very holy - can hear the Good News of great joy and spread that News to the rest of the world. You are worthy, God said so as He loved all of us in a BIG way. **God's proclamation over all of us today...everyone of us is loved, everyone...the manger says so.**

God calls on these wisemen from the east to search out and find Jesus. These men were subservient to the kings of the east and as servants, they were not their own bosses. Other people told them what to do with their skills and their expertise. Anyone here today feel like that. Your expertise is at the service of a boss. Jesus says that's okay, I will show you my unconditional and extravagant love. You see those wisemen, they too were like you, under the direction of someone who was over them. But God used them to proclaim His love to the world as they took the message back to their kingdoms and God can use you as He challenges you to go into your work place and love BIG.

In the passage we read from 1 Timothy 1 there is a person just like us who is writing his testimony of God's love in his life. An imperfect person who recognized what God had done on Christmas day. Listen to what this guy named Paul says to Timothy about Jesus and the way He loved BIG in Paul's life:

*<sup>15</sup> This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. <sup>16</sup> But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. <sup>17</sup> All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.*

Paul is not messing around as he writes to Timothy. He fesses up that he is the worst of all the sinners. Maybe that's how you feel today. Maybe you are convinced that you just might be the worst of all and that God could never love you. Maybe you have convinced yourself that what Jesus did for them could never be extended to you. Maybe you're here today and you think you're too far gone, too far over some imaginary edge, too lost, too hopeless and too sin sick to be forgiven. God could never bring you back, redeem your life, fix what's broken or repair what's been damaged. The message of Christmas is found in the words Paul writes to Timothy... **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.** You can be forgiven, the gap can be bridged, the separation can be mended, a heart can be healed, a broken spirit can be repaired, the outcasts can be accepted, the servants can become messengers, and the lowly can see God.

You are here today for a reason. You are here today on purpose. God wants to use this Christmas season to remind you just how much He loves you. That manger is God's way of loving BIG. Those people are evidence of God loving BIG. That stable is evidence of God loving the world in BIG ways. Will you ask God to forgive you of your sins, to right what is wrong, to show you His extravagant love and to bring you into His arms? In return **we can light up the world with the wonderful brilliance of a God who loves BIG.**

Invite card reminder because God can use us (1 Tim 1:16) to reach others and let them know about God's love and how big it is.

Transition to communion.