

December 31, 2021

Dear HLBC Family,

I hope you all had a great Christmas season for 2021, and now that we are embarking on a new year, a new world, I want to share with you some final Christmas thoughts to take us into 2022.

Nothing defines our great God and Savior Jesus better than love. He showed that matchless love to each of us at the cross. Jesus willingly took our place so that we could have His place. What Jesus did on the cross was die for our sins so that we might be forgiven when we trust in what Christ has done there. Sounds simple doesn't it? That's because it is. When we, by faith, turn from sin and receive the sacrifice He offered in our place, then we can have eternal life and escape the righteous and justified judgment of God the Father. Truly, the only thing complicated is the question of our obedience. But listen, God hasn't complicated it, we have. But that's another thought for another day. I want to speak to you of the kind of love God has shown us, and our responsibility to love others likewise.

On the cross, Jesus voluntarily bore our sins. He allowed people to lie about him and kill him. He used the evil done to him to bring good to others. He sacrificed himself and demonstrated **the greatest love of all**. On the cross is where we are redeemed, and it is where our sin debt to God is canceled. Not a single one of us can tell of a more compassionate love than His love toward us demonstrated at the cross. No other act of love compares in light of eternity.

There was an old song my sisters and I loved as we were growing up. It was by Jackie de Shannon entitled "*What The World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love*." In one of the lines of that song, the writer said, '*love is the only thing there is just too little of*.' Wow! That sure applies today as we look around our cities and nation and world. Love. A small word that when practiced, has a huge impact on everyone it touches.

As we move into the new year may I challenge us all to **focus on love in 2022**. Loving our family and neighbor; loving our friends and co-workers—literally, everyone with whom we come in contact. Above all let's make an intentional effort to first, love God with all our heart. There are so many expressions of that kind of love we can exhibit. Kindness and love go hand in hand. In today's culture, kindness really matters. Let's make it our mission to show everyone God's love in practical ways in the coming year(s). Get creative, all of us, and show that love every day. Make plans for each day to love someone without conditions. Consider these thoughts as you consider kindness to be a way of life.

Agape love is the highest form of love that's given unconditionally.

In the New Testament, agape, one the Greek words for love, is the highest form of love. But outside of the New Testament, the word was rarely used. Prior to New Testament times, agapē did not carry any special significance as a higher kind of love. Thus, it's the New Testament understanding of the unique nature of God's love—(not the word's usage in the Greek-speaking world of the first century)—that gives the word agapē its special meaning. Agapē is the word that describes God's love in John 3:16, "God loved the world in this way ..." (CSB). We are commanded to love God (Matt. 22:37) and love one another (John 13:34) with agapē love. Agapē is the word for love used in 1 Corinthians 13, a chapter we appropriately call the 'love chapter', penned by the Apostle Paul. To agapē someone is to love them with an unconditional God-like love.

All genuine love comes from God because God is love.

We all remember the Great Commission, and rightfully so. it is our mandate to share the Good News of salvation through Christ with others. Truly, that is the ultimate act of showing God's love for us as Christ followers; telling people how to escape the penalty for our sins and live eternally with God. Yet the impetus for the Great Commission is in what Jesus said about the Great Commandment. Look briefly with me at the passage in Matthew 22:34-40.

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?” 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.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Notice the order in which Jesus gave the second Great Commandment. We are first to love God with all we are, all we have, and all we hope to be in Him and for Him. We must be watchful and careful that nothing should ever crowd Him out. Getting that right first, makes the second part of that Great commandment possible, feasible, do-able. So, Jesus added that man’s second responsibility is to **love** his **neighbor as** himself.

We should thoroughly think of how very much we do love ourselves, of how much of our life activities center around the care and comfort of self. Then we should try to imagine what it would be like if we showered that love on our family, friends and neighbors. Then we should do it. Such behavior is not natural; it is *supernatural*. Only those who have been born again can do it, and then only by allowing Christ to do it through them. Love God as we should, first. Then and only then can we love others as we are commanded.

So, a biblical definition of love must start with God. Whether that love is romantic—between husband and wife—or the bond between friends, love that is genuine comes from God because “God is love” (1 John 4:16). If God is love, then we love others best by loving Him most. Loving God supremely, before and above anything else, is easily revealed in how we love others.

Followers of Christ are to be known by the way they love.

Jesus commanded His followers: “*Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*” (John 13:34-35, CSB). The word Jesus used for love is the verb form of agapē. The pattern of our love is “as I have loved you.” In other words, we are to be known by our self-giving, sacrificial, unconditional love for one another. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, describes what such love looks like, practically speaking. I won’t take the time to exegete that chapter here, but at the very least you should read that chapter often; perhaps daily as part of your quiet time. You will get a working (in practice) example of agapē love. It doesn’t have to be complicated either! Here are a few ways to show God’s love to others.

LISTEN TO OTHERS

In today’s culture, it seems like so many voices are speaking (and often shouting). Communication is always at our fingertips through email, text, social media, and the 24-hour news cycle. But while social media has increased communication, it has also given us the false appearance of true connection and real relationships. In fact, Generation Z, who are the most “connected,” is considered, by their own admission, the loneliest generation. It is rare for people to feel truly heard today.

So, commit to slow down, ask questions, and really listen to people. Listen to understand, not just to prepare your response. Allow people to speak their mind without interruption or judgement. People will feel valued (and loved!) when they are heard and understood. That kind of love will permit you to share Jesus as the ultimate answer to all their issues of life.

BE GENEROUS TO OTHERS

Can you think of a time in your life when someone showed you such generosity that you still think, “Wow, I can’t believe they did that for me.” Maybe it was a gift of their time when you needed someone. Maybe it was a financially generous gift. Perhaps they shared kind words or stood up for you in a difficult time. How did that moment make you feel? You

probably felt loved. You felt seen. You felt valued to the point that you still remember that act of generosity.

When we love someone, we give to them. That loving characteristic comes from God! After all, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he **gave**...” He loved, so He gave. We love our spouse, children, friends, so we give to them. God created His love to be a generous kind of love. Of course, people think of money when talking about generosity, and that is definitely one aspect of generosity. But get creative to find how can you also be generous with your time, talents, and your voice?

Who can you invest some time into, either by helping them out with a practical need or some quality time? What special skills or talents can you provide? Who can you advocate for?

ENCOURAGE OTHERS

Everyone we meet is carrying some kind of burden. Even the most “put-together” people have something weighing them down. Just because someone carries it well doesn’t mean it’s not heavy. How can we help to lift someone’s burdens? It can be as simple as words of encouragement.

The word “encourage” comes from an Old French word that means to “make strong.” When we encourage another, we are making their spirits strong. We are strengthening their hope, their faith, and their resolve to keep going. Paul told the Thessalonian church to encourage one another with the hope of Christ’s return. Don’t hesitate to speak life-giving words into someone’s circumstances. It can’t hurt, and it most certainly can help someone gain strength in their life.

BE KIND TO OTHERS

Showing kindness means thinking about the other person more than you think about yourself. What are their needs? What would make their lives better? It doesn’t have to be huge, but it should be thoughtful. Being thoughtful and kind communicates to the other person that you value their needs above your own. Selfless love comes from God. 1

Corinthians 13:5 says that love “is not self-seeking.” Practice being others-focused. Show God’s love with acts of kindness. The internet is full of sites to give you ideas of showing kindness to others; here are just a few of the many you will find.

- Be kind to your server(s) in a restaurant and tip them well.
 - Take the time to text an encouraging word or scripture daily to friends and family
 - Leave quarters at the laundromat
 - Write an encouraging comment on your social media pages
 - Sit down with a senior and ask them about their past and their experience in life
 - Help your spouse with household chores and duties
 - Have a judgment free day (stop putting others down to make you feel better)
 - Cook a meal and deliver it to a shut-in
 - Send an encouraging postcard
 - Be polite on the road when driving
- Truly, the possibilities are endless’

PRAY FOR OTHERS

Pray for people! Yes, pray for them in your own time with God, because God hears our prayers. But, also pray for people when you’re with them. One of the easiest ways to show love and concern is to pray with someone right then and there. In any conversation, at any time, simply ask, “How can I pray for you?”

If someone mentions they’re sick, stressed, or excited, simply ask, “Can I pray for you?”

And then pray with them. Show them love and genuinely pray for their needs or thank God for their good news. See how God works through those powerful moments of prayer. People will genuinely be overcome with appreciation, love, and genuine heart change. It’s also a great way

to open up a conversation about faith. **That leads me to the last and most important act of kindness you could ever perform.**

SHARE JESUS WITH OTHERS

Kindness will open opportunities to share your faith with others, which is the ultimate act of loving others as you love yourself. We should never shy away from giving the eternally life changing Gospel to others. All the kindness we show, should be with that ultimate goal in mind. Kindness will earn you the opportunity to witness to Christ's unconditional love for us. Everyone deserves a chance to hear the truth—don't let your opportunities slip away.

So let me end with this. **It's possible to show God's love to everyone** God's Love is *for* everyone. Does that mean your combative neighbor? Yes. Your estranged sibling? Yep. Your micro-managing boss? Absolutely. The person who gets 'under your skin' and 'gets on your last nerve'? Yes, it includes them, too. God loves each of them, individually, so much that He sent His son, Jesus, to die *for them too*.

Everyone we encounter — EVERYONE — is someone that God loves, and Jesus died for. Even difficult people. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not a select few. He died for our sins without conditions. In fact, He suffered and died knowing we-world rejected Him, and we continue to reject Him daily when we fall short as His disciple. Yet, knowing all that, He still loved us enough to take our place.

This is what God's love is all about! It is love with no strings attached. His love expects nothing in return. Pure, sacrificial love. When we show this kind of love, we are showing God's love. It's His love shining through us. **If it seems difficult to muster up your own love for someone, focus on the fact that you are being a conduit for God's love to flow through. It's not by your own strength, but through God's. This is how you show God's love to others even when it seems difficult.** How can you show God's love to someone today? Really.

Happy New Year,
Love Pastor Jimmy