

Rev. David Strain

December 20, 2009 - PM

Why Christ Came #3:  
To Propitiate the Wrath of God  
1 John 4:1-11

One of the big deals about Christmas is gift giving.

I remember one Christmas Eve as a boy going with my father into downtown Glasgow, trying to find a present for my mother. Why we had only gotten around to it on Christmas Eve I can't recall, but there we were, in the insanity of last minute shopping, with all the other slightly panicked looking last minute shoppers, trudging from one store decked out in sleigh bells and tinsel into the cold and rain, and back again into the next over the top, Christmas-themed, shopping nightmare. It was not fun. At all. We did it, however, because we love my mother, and we wanted to express that in a gift we thought she'd appreciate.

For the most part, gift giving is *intended*, at least, to be an expression of love.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible is found in 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."

It is a verse about the giving of a gift. In this case, the giver is Almighty God and the gift He gave, the inaugural Christmas gift, we might say, was the gift of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. And John's gospel even tells us *why* God gave that gift. He gave the gift of His Son, born of the virgin in the stable, because He loved the world. The gift giving of God arises from His love for the lost world.

This evening I want to turn to another of John's writings where he explains in more detail the gift giving of God. 1 John 4:7-10 serves in many ways as a kind of commentary on and exposition of John 3:16. Would you look at it with me, please? 1 John 4:7-10

Now the first thing that I want you to notice with me is the way that the passage is bracketed by two statements about our obligations to love one another. In verses 7 and 8 John says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not

know God, for God is love.” Then in verse 11 we have the same exhortation in slightly different form, “Beloved if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.”

We don’t have time to linger over those two exhortations and unpack some of the rich truths they contain, but suffice for now to notice that between those two poles, those two exhortations to mutual love in verses 7-8 and verse 11, stands a hugely significant and deeply theological exposition of the loving gift God has given to us in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Here is the point I want you to see: the theology, the doctrine of the Christian gospel is never irrelevant or abstract or cerebral or obtuse. It is not a case of rarified philosophical assertion that has no bearing upon your Monday to Sunday life in the home or the workplace. No, for John, the greatest and most profound truths of the Christian gospel lead directly to, and issue inevitably in, *changed lives*. There are *implications* that flow from the truth, for the way you think and speak and act. If your life is to be changed, it will be changed as a result of coming to grips with the central truths John articulates here.

Well, what are they? Look at verses 9-10 with me, please, “In this the love of God was manifested towards us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Those two statements are parallel statements. The second one unpacks and elaborates upon and explains the first. Verse 9 is really a paraphrase of Jesus’ words in John 3:16, isn’t it?

Listen to those two verses compared and contrasted. John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 4:9: “In this the love of God was manifested towards us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him.”

You see the similarities? John is echoing Jesus’ words. The coming of Jesus, for which the angels sang, and over whom the shepherds bowed in worship, the arrival of the only begotten Son of God was a gift of love from the heart of God to a dying world. We were perishing. That, the Bible explains, is the fruit of human sin.

We are universally sinners. We stand under the condemnation of a holy God. The wages of sin is death. We are dead in trespasses and sins. And God acted in sending His Son that, in place of death, we might enter life. He came, John 4:9 says, “That we might live through Him.” He came, John 3:16 says, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

But how does that equation work? How does the birth of Jesus Christ deal with our sin problem so that, instead of spiritual death here and eternal death in hell hereafter, anyone and everyone who believes in Jesus might live?

How does the gift of God in Christ manifest His love exactly?

That is what verse 10 explains. First of all, notice that John elaborates on the *reason* for the gift God gave. And then secondly, notice that John explains the *true nature* of the gift God gave.

First of all, the reason for the gift. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son”

We’ve already seen in John 3:16 that God loved the world. We saw in 1 John 4:8 that God is love, that is, His character is loving. We’ve seen that love is the motive and reason in God for the sending of Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, verse 9, says is the manifestation of the love of God towards us. God makes His love known in Christ.

I have known people in the course of my ministry who, for various reasons, have wondered how God felt about them. They perhaps felt that God did not care much for them. They may have observed their circumstances, which were often very hard, and concluded that God had forgotten them. John would say to you tonight that the measure of the attitude of God towards you is the gift of Jesus Christ, never your circumstances. It is not safe to read back from our circumstances to the heart of God. We must learn instead to trace the love of God from the gift of God. Look at Christ and you see the love of God for sinners on display. Are you a sinner? God loves you so much that He gave His Son to save such as you.

But there is more to it even than that in verse 9. John tells us simply that the coming of Christ displays God love for the world. He tells us that, in providing salvation for sinner by means of Jesus Christ, God was not moved by our love for

Him. Which is a good thing, since the Bible everywhere characterizes human beings as instinctive rebels against God. We are by nature God haters not God lovers. We reinvent Him to fit our preferences rather than bow before Him as He has revealed Himself to be. We remake Him in our own image so that He is easy for us to love. He is just like ourselves, only nicer, bigger, and better. He is everything we love about ourselves minus our faults.

That is neither love—it is narcissism—nor is it God that we love—it is an idol made in our own image.

No, says John. Christ did not come because God was compelled to respond to the great love of humanity for Him. God's gift giving is not like ours so often. They buy you a gift, and so now you feel obligated to get them something, too! We did not put God in our debt with our wonderful love for Him and His ways and word and works. God was not bowled over by how generous and selfless and giving we are towards Him. No, we did not love God. We loved ourselves. And seeing all that about us, nevertheless, He loved us and sent His Son that we might live through Him.

That is the great source of wonder surrounding the first Christmas. Christ was born into a world that had turned its back on God. God acted out of love for those who denied Him and chose self rule over God's rule. We've been doing that ever since Adam chose that path in Eden, haven't we? We like life on our own terms, according to our own rules, with our own agenda. We don't like the idea that God has a law to which we must conform, that He has an agenda and ours must fit around His. That's why, when Christ did come, the world looked at the eternal Son of God, we observed the love of God made flesh in Jesus, and instead of embracing Him, we nailed Him to a cross and left Him to die.

And God saw and knew that is who and what we are. He saw our loveless, hard, rebel hearts. And He loved us despite the truth. Friend, God loves you *despite* the truth about you, not *because* of it. You have done nothing, nor can you do anything, to move Him to love sinners. Instead, you deserve His wrath. His law condemns you. You are guilty. Yet, guilty though you may be, you are loved with the generous love that gives Christ for sinners.

Then secondly, notice what John says about the nature of the gift. How is it that this loving gift is able to procure life for hell deserving sinners?

Look at verse 10 again, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

John says that Jesus was sent. Christ’s birth did not just happen one day. He came with a mission. He was sent with a task to accomplish and a work to complete. What was that task? He was to be the propitiation for our sins.

Here’s the reason Christ came: to be the propitiation for our sins. Whatever else is true of His coming, without *this* our Christmas meditations are empty and fruitless. Christmas collapses into mere sentimentality without *this*. Christ was born to be a propitiation for our sins. This is what Christmas is really about.

Now I am almost certain that most of you have no idea what John is talking about, am I right? What on earth is a “propitiation,” John? Propitiation is not a word we drop into casual conversation, (I’d like to see you try!). So what *is* John on about?

Propitiation in scripture has to do with *sacrifice*. It is a word connected specifically with the ritual sacrifices of the Old Covenant era. In the Old Testament ,you may know, worship involved animal sacrifice. It was brutal and ugly and bloody, and it was *supposed* to be, because *sin* is brutal and ugly and bloody.

Every time someone came to the temple in Jerusalem to worship the message they were confronted with in very graphic terms as they saw the lambs sacrificed for them was, “If you are to be reconciled to God, your sin needs to be atoned for. The penalty needs to be paid.” And so animals were sacrificed as a substitute victim in the place of the guilty sinner. It was all intended to be a picture to us of the Lamb of God who would one day come to take away the sin of the world, as John the Baptist called Jesus when He came to be baptized.

Jesus Christ is our atoning sacrifice that stands in the room and stead of sinners to satisfy the wrath of God on their behalf. He came to propitiate God’s wrath and deal with our sin.

You see, not only is our God “love,” as verse 8 remind us, our God is also a “consuming fire,” as Hebrews 12:29 puts it. God is essentially just as well as loving. All sin must be paid for. He can no more ignore your sin than He can Himself commit sin. Justice must be done for your sins and mine. Either it is paid for by Jesus Christ in your place on the cross, or you will pay for it yourself in hell forever.

And as unfestive as it may seem, *that* is the Christian gospel and *that* is the *real* message of Christmas. The baby was born to die. He was sent to be the sacrifice that atones for sinners. Jesus embraced the cross the Father gave His Son, moved by love. The full measure of that love is not ultimately the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The full measure of that love is the man stripped and bare, beaten and disfigured, and nailed to a Roman cross.

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son *to the cross*. In this, the love of God is manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world *to die on the cross*, that we might live through Him.

It rather dims the Christmas cheer, you might say, to think about the nails in the hands and feet of the one who was born of the virgin, but if we do not, we have not understood why Christ came at all. You miss the point of the cradle entirely if you overlook the cross. Far more alarming, you miss the love gift of God for sinners if you overlook the cross.

As John 3:16 reminds us, the response we must make to the babe born to die for our sins is *faith*. It is whoever *believes* in Him that does not perish but has eternal life. It is not a renewed resolve to be a good guy. It is not pious language and charitable giving. It is faith in Christ alone. You see being a good guy, pious language, charitable giving, going through some formally religious motions—they do not deal with the root problem of our true human condition. They leave our sin untouched.

Faith alone in Christ alone, however, does *nothing*. It makes no attempt to *be different*. Instead, like a beggar's empty hand held out and waiting to be filled, faith reaches out to receive pardon and cleansing and renewal as a sheer gift of God. Faith clings to the cross. Faith sees the gift of God in Christ for sinners. An authentic response to Jesus Christ never asserts its own goodness or merits. It does not rest on being basically a nice guy. Faith abandons all that as folly. Faith recognizes our own bankruptcy and guilt and sin and runs with it to the only one who can deal with it. It goes to Jesus Christ crucified. It goes to the propitiation for our sins that God has provided and it rests wholly on Him.

Unless that is your response to the coming of Jesus Christ, you will never know peace with God. You will never even begin to plumb the depths of the love of God. All that waits for you is the justice of God.

Of course, the faith that does nothing but simply trusts wholly in Jesus to save us does not stay that way. Remember how we began? Verses 7-8 and verse 11 tell us that flowing from a real grasp of the gift of God in the cross of Christ come changed attitudes, transformed behavior. When you come to taste for yourself the love of God in Christ, you begin to echo that love yourself in all your dealing with others.

A changed life is the result of the gift of God. Love is the motive for the gift of God. And the cross of Jesus Christ describes the contours of the gift of God.

It is my prayer for you that this Christmas you will not overlook the purpose of the coming of Christ. I pray that this Christmas, whenever you think of the cradle, you will think of the cross. I pray that in place of the sentimental greetings-card image of a baby laid in a manger you will see that the true gift of God for you this Christmas is a Savior who takes your sin away and you will abandon yourself in simple faith to Him.

Now maybe you've been intrigued and you have some questions, or maybe you've been offended and you want to argue, or maybe you'd just like to hear a bit more. If that describes you, then let me draw your attention to the cards that you will find in the pocket in the pew in front of you. There is an information brochure that you can take away with you, telling you a little about us here at Main Street Presbyterian, and there is a contact card (that looks like this...). If you'd fill that out and let us know that you've been here, we can follow up with you if you'd like to learn more.

For now, let me invite you to bow your heads with me as we pray....