

God of Love and Mercy
at First Presbyterian Church
June 12, 2026

In recent weeks, and actually from longer ago than that, Reverend Zanicky has spoken about the importance of Christianity to our culture. Many of the fundamental principles from our country's founding days have been rooted in Christian beliefs. What I plan to do is look at that same issue, the importance of Christian concepts and perspective, on a more personal level, rather than the benefits to society. Just how do our personal lives benefit from Christianity?

I'm not an expert on religion, especially the enormous variety of the world's many current religions. But looking back to the origins of Christianity, there were ideas and principles that allowed the Gospel to take root in the Greco-Roman world first. Then eventually to Europe, and from there to America. We think of this now as "Western Culture." How did that happen? Because the Gospel announced God's love for humanity, both collectively and individually, and opened the door to a personal relationship with God. The Resurrection demonstrates that relationship to God goes beyond this life. It is a relationship rooted in love, not just obedience. Love for neighbor is our response, by which that love is lived out.

This idea, that God loves us, we the people of His creation, was not a feature of the ancient world. The pagan gods of the ancients didn't really care about people. They were too busy with their own rivalries. They needed to be cajoled by priests who knew the right incantations and sacrifices to coerce the god to do his duty of providing rain, or whatever else might be within his sphere of influence. Yes, I'm oversimplifying, but that was the idea.

Things developed differently among the Hebrews, the Children of Israel. At the formation of the Israelite nation, what was created at Mount Sinai wasn't a kingdom. It was a Covenant. In the Covenant at Mount Sinai, "I am who I am," or "Yahwey," became the god of the Israelites, and they became His people. The Israelites agreed to this covenant, and were then bound by the Laws that were given. God, in turn, was obligated to protect and care for them.

This kind of covenant, between unequal powers, was not unusual. It was a common tool of diplomacy. A weaker king would covenant with a stronger king for protection, and usually agree to provide tribute. So it was that Jehu, a king of Israel after the death of Ahab, agreed to a treaty, a covenant, with the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III in 841BC. "The black obelisk" (now in the British Museum)

pictures King Jehu bearing tribute as a record of the transaction. Earlier, King Ahab had married princess Jezebel as part of his alliance with Ethbaal, the King of the Sidonians. Was “love” a part of any of these covenants? Well, not explicitly. But marriage often was. The partners in Covenant became, in a sense, family.

Yet, from that Covenant at Sinai, we do find the word “love” used, as part of the Third Commandment:

Exodus 20: ⁴“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Even so, early on in the Bible we don’t often see the word “love” used in reference to the relationship between God and His people. That doesn’t mean love wasn’t there. It was. But usually, the issue is the Law. God’s Law, which the people have broken, as by worshiping other gods such as those of the Canaanites.

Something interesting happened in the later years of the Israelite Monarchy. The last two of the Biblical prophets to appear in the (northern) Kingdom of Israel are Amos and Hosea. The prophets sent from God play a major role distinguishing Israelite, and later Jewish religion, from all the others at that time. These prophets did not take orders from the king. They delivered messages directly from God. In the time of Ahab, earlier, Elijah was a constant critic of Ahab and Jezebel. By the time Amos appears, it is about sixty years after Ahab and Elijah. He speaks to the people, not to the king. God seems to have given up on the monarchy. God’s message by Amos is timeless: a condemnation of how the wealthy treat the poor.

Here’s a small sample of Amos:

Amos 2: ⁶ Thus says the Lord:

“For three transgressions of Israel,

and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;

because they sell the righteous for silver,

and the needy for a pair of shoes—

⁷ they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,

and turn aside the way of the afflicted; ...

The message is: “Do right, or doom is coming.” But just two years later, Hosea appears. God has given him much the same message, but with a different way of presenting it. He is to portray the broken covenant in his personal life. He exhibits

what a broken covenant is, but ultimately also shows what hope and reconciliation is as well. It's a moving story, but I won't read it here.

Ultimately the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where Hosea had prophesied, failed. The capitol Samaria fell to the Assyrians about 60 years after Amos and Hosea. But recent archeology shows that many from the Northern kingdom of Israel escaped south to Jerusalem. They must have taken with them the words of Amos, Hosea, and other records. Jerusalem underwent a building spree, and expanded to the point of needing new walls, and a more reliable water system. Then the Assyrians came for Jerusalem during the time of King Hezekiah. Jerusalem did not fall, but became an Assyrian vassal state for seventy years or so.

Then something else important happened. In the time of King Josiah, a scroll was found in the Temple during renovation that had apparently been lost – the Book of Deuteronomy! There we find a new perspective on the Covenant, something not in Exodus. It is what Jews call “The Shemya.” It is a commandment to love:

Deuteronomy 6: ⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; ⁵ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

When Jesus was asked “What is the greatest commandment” by one of the Pharisees, he recites the Shemya from Deuteronomy:

Matthew 22: ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus also is including this scripture from Leviticus 19:

Leviticus 19: ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

So, what we are seeing here, over many years, is how the idea of God's love for humanity, and the responsibility to love God, became a central theme of Judaism and Christianity. The difference is that Christians accept that Jesus lived out that love in a sacrifice of his life that transcended any humanly imaginable love. He did so for all of humanity. Furthermore, in the Resurrection, Jesus rose from the dead as a sign of what God intends for his children, life beyond the grave. This love was not just restricted to the Jews. Peter, and then Barnabus, Paul, and others, began going to the Gentiles, and all who would hear this good news: A new relationship between God and man, not based on The Law, but based on love and mercy. It is a new way of living, a different perspective on life. A reason to live in hope, not fear.

Here's how the Apostle Paul describes how to live in his letter to The Romans:

Romans 12: ⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is completely different from what, up until then, and even now, was normal human behavior.

John, in his first letter, writes this:

1st John 5: ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

So, here we have two Apostles giving us advice on how we, each of us, is to live in the Spirit of Jesus. But, how does it work for us as individuals in this broken world we live in? The only thing I can do is try to tell my own story, and suggest that in this Gospel, how I have found peace, inspiration, and faith.

As a child I heard the Bible stories and attended Sunday School, had a good family, and had the blessing that was. But I still was a child, and thought as a child. I was interested in trains, rockets, electricity, and all those kinds of boy things. I wasn't adept at getting along with others. I was shy. I was typically the youngest in my grade in school, and less mature. In the social hierarchy I was near the bottom. Yet the fact that I was at the bottom socially did not teach me how I should behave better towards my sister. She was five years younger than I was. I teased her, even though I was being teased and made the victim. My other sister was competitive. I barely stayed ahead of her despite being a year and a half older. She wanted my mother to hold me out of school for a year so she could catch up. In a

sense, my spiritual journey started where those pagans were: not trusting anyone but my mother, and feeling alone in the jungle of a world in which I lived.

Just as human history has followed a path toward more enlightenment, so did I. Boy Scouts helped. I learned responsibility by having a paper route, and I learned to manage my own money. I was at least competitive enough to make decent grades in school. But, I was more or less afraid of girls, and fumbled my few opportunities badly. Then some things changed my perspective. One was that I met Cindy, and she actually seemed to like me.

I also found out that I didn't have to compete for everything anymore. It was 1970. I was on midshipman summer "cruise" with a few dozen classmates on the aircraft carrier USS Independence. We made port calls in both Malta and Athens. I went ashore as a tourist. Of course, being in Athens, I was looking for some Greek souvenirs to take home. One of those things just had to be a small statue of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. Now, looking back, that was like bringing an idol into our house for my mother. She was the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries whose life work in the Congo was to bring the Gospel to people there, to free them from heathen ways! As the time, this issue just did not occur to me!

These statues of Athena were not hard to find, but it seemed that there was always someone who managed to find one for less than I paid, and that applied to everything. What I figured out was, that the price wasn't important. I didn't need to compete on price. Instead of being unhappy at not having gotten the best deal, I could be happy that I had a gift that my mother would appreciate. At least, I assumed she would appreciate it. I think she did, despite what it was. I was her son.

I was able to make a choice between happiness and unhappiness. That mattered to a lot more things than just souvenirs. As I gradually gained in wisdom from experience, I came to understand better how the stories in the Bible lead us to be able to receive God's love and mercy. I didn't need to live in fear of embarrassment and guilt over errors. Sure, errors and mistakes still happen. But under God's grace, I can live free from having to worry about things. I can put them behind me. That freedom from worry was liberating. I could try doing things I never would have earlier in life, such as standing up here in front of everybody substituting for a real pastor. I can do so knowing that, if I make a mistake, God can somehow make the best of it. It's His world. God loves His world, He loves me, and He loves you. Knowing that is a wonderful blessing that we receive through Christ Jesus our Lord. In the Resurrection of Jesus, we know that this love for us will not perish, but extends beyond this mortal life on Earth.

So, yes, we all benefit individually from Christianity. Not only the promises of God for the world to come, but in how we live in the here and now as well. Amen.