

Advent 2020



The Way God Loves

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John 3:16-17

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My mother enrolled me in Confirmation Class when I reached middle school. The process for joining the church was rigorous when I was coming of age. We met with the pastor for two years every Saturday morning for two hours to learn the Bible and become indoctrinated into the Presbyterian way.

Some of you might conclude, given my choice of profession that Confirmation ignited a spark of faith in me. Not so. The concept of faith eluded me. I could not grasp its central message. I was so consumed with my own identity issues as an emerging adolescent that the notion of God's love remained foreign to me.

Pastor Fulcomer drilled John 3:16 into our thick, little skulls, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." I committed this verse to memory. I did so, primarily to appease elders in my church who would examine us for church membership. While I memorized this verse, it never travelled the requisite 18 inches from my head to my heart.

Today's subject is love. During these four Sundays leading up to Christmas, what we call Advent, our focus has been hope, peace, joy, and love. We bundled these four words under the banner, *What the World Needs Now*. Does anyone doubt that hope, peace, joy, and love is what the world needs now?

John 3:16 is the world's most famous Bible verse, according to the YouVersion Bible App. It's a popular sign at major sporting events. The Protestant reformer Martin

Luther called it, “The heart of the Bible; the gospel in miniature.”

There are eight key words in this single Bible verse. Eight words to communicate eight monumental truths of Scripture.

Word #1: God. “For God so loved...” Literally, these words in Greek translate, “the so-loved God.” Love functions in adjectival relationship to God. Love is an essential attribute of God. We have one English word for love but the Greek language has four words for love. The greatest of these four loves, *agape*, refers to the way God loves. God loves people unconditionally and sacrificially. Agape love is not based on the worth or merit of the receiver. It originates solely in the heart of the giver.

Word #2: world. “God so loved the world...” World refers to all people, without distinction or exception. God does not love certain people according to race or ethnicity. God loves everyone, regardless of whether they seem loveable to us.

Word #3: gave. “God so loved the world that He gave...” Giving is endemic to God’s nature. The verb “gave” is expressed in past tense to represent completed action. God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus.

Word #4: Son. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...” God’s love is not merely sentimental. Love costs God something. Love costs God what is most dear to him—His only begotten Son.

I learned this verse in the King James edition of the Bible. *Begotten* is an old-fashioned word meaning “one and only.” Begotten from the compound Greek word *monogenesis* (mono meaning “alone” and genesis “signifying birth”). It’s a word used to express the uniqueness of Jesus. There is no one like Jesus. He’s in a class all by himself. God so loved the world that He gave us Jesus.

Word #5: whosoever. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever...” We shift in this middle of John 3:16 from all people in the world to individual believers. “Whosoever” is the formal way of saying “anyone.”

Word #6: believe. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes...” Believe does not communicate merely intellectual assent. Believe conveys trust, confidence, and conviction.

Henri Nouwen writes about going to the circus as a child and watching the Flying Rodleights perform their high wire act. Nouwen later became friends with these trapeze artists, even traveling with them for a week. Nouwen talked with their leader about their high wire artistry. He described the twin roles of flying and catching. A flyer’s job is to fly and the catcher’s job is to catch. The elder Rodleigh said, “As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. I simply stretch out my arms and the wait for the catcher to catch me. The worst thing a flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher.” Nouwen reflects on their conversation in his writing, “If we are the flyers, God is the catcher. Trust the Catcher.”

Word #7: perish. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish.” We may cringe at this word “perish” and resist the thought that God’s love includes judgment. Look at it this way. When our adult children were in high school, Chris and I imposed a curfew on them. If we told them to be home by midnight and they arrived at 2:00 AM, they could expect our wrath. Wrath was an expression of our love. God’s wrath is on sin but he gives love to us as sinners. There are dire consequences that come with rejecting God’s love in Jesus Christ. This verse comes with a warning. To reject God’s salvation results in separation from God.

Word #8: eternal life. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 closes with the promise of everlasting life. Jesus speaks about eternal life in present tense. Eternal life with Christ begins now and goes on forever. How ironic that this verse ends with words that have no ending.

You may recall the name Dale Bruner. Dale led our church some years ago in a two-day exploration of the gospel of John. Dale summarized John 3:16 this way:

God	the greatest subject ever.
Love	the greatest affection ever.
World	the greatest object ever.
His one and only Son	the greatest gift ever.
Whosoever believes	the greatest opportunity ever.
Will not perish	the greatest rescue ever.
Everlasting life	the greatest promise ever.

God as the greatest subject ever, expresses the greatest affection ever, on the greatest object ever, by the greatest gift

ever, by the greatest opportunity ever, by the greatest rescue plan ever, to give us the greatest promise ever.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

I began this sermon by referencing my middle school inability to comprehend the meaning of John 3:16. I recall something C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “There is a story about a schoolboy who was asked what he thought God was like. He replied, as far as he could make out, God was the sort of person always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to put a stop to it.”

I could have been that schoolboy. My reluctance to give myself completely to Jesus had everything to do with the nagging thought that I might be missing out on something in life if I committed my life to Christ. Could God be a cosmic killjoy who is against pleasure and people having fun? Silly me. The words of John Piper come to mind, “God is not a killjoy, he just opposes what kills joy.”

When it comes to God’s love, there may be some part of us that doubts whether God really loves us as we are. We feel somehow we must live better and act better for God to love us. We must somehow earn God’s favor and win God’s approval.

The Bible is adamant. There is nothing we can do to merit God’s love. Consider what Philip Yancey writes in *What’s So Amazing About Grace*. “Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained in seminaries and divinity schools, no

amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes. And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less—no amount of pride, or pornography or adultery, or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.”

There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. God loves us, not because we are loveable, but because God is love.

Every day I drive by a handmade sign attached to a tree along Lawyers Road, “You matter to God.” Precisely.

Here’s the question I leave with you. Do you really believe down deep in your soul that God can satisfy the deepest desires of your heart? Do you really believe God can give you hope, peace, joy, and love? Or do you keep running to other people, places, and things to meet these needs?

God as the greatest subject ever, expresses the greatest affection ever, on the greatest object ever, by the greatest gift ever, by the greatest opportunity ever, by the greatest rescue plan ever, to give us the greatest promise ever.