

## JOHN 3:16—"LOVE"

**INTRO:** This is the third Sunday of Advent, and the theme this Sunday is "love." Since Advent is the season of looking forward to and preparing for the coming of Jesus, there is probably no better verse in the Bible to signify the theme of love and the coming into the world of Jesus than **John 3:16**, "**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**"

There is actually something of a danger with this passage, particularly at Christmastime. The danger is two-fold: First, the passage is so familiar to many people that we may tend to think, "**I've heard or read this dozens of times; there's nothing new to see here.**" Second, Advent and Christmas make us think of the baby in the manger, new mothers, and connote to many of us families at home sitting around the fire, eating turkey, giving presents, memories from our childhood, and warm, fuzzy feelings. In fact, however, that's not what this verse is about at all.

But before we can talk about this, we need to see the *context* of **John 3:16**.

- v. 16 begins the final paragraph of a lengthy discourse that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus which began back in v. 1. It began with Nicodemus coming to Jesus, and Jesus telling him "**Unless one is born again he cannot even see the KOG.**" So, the *general context* is about how to enter the KOG or, to put it another way, what it means to be Born Again or, to put it another way, believing in Jesus—because "entering the KOG; being Born Again; believing in Jesus" are just different ways of saying the same thing.
- When the Bible was written, they did not use quotation marks—so some scholars think that v. 16 begins Jesus' concluding words to Nicodemus, while others think that Jesus' own discourse ended at v.15, and v.16 begins the Apostle John's commentary on what Jesus just said. It really doesn't matter—the words are the same, and the thoughts expressed here are clearly consistent with what Jesus said elsewhere on multiple occasions. So, whether they are John's words or Jesus', they give us Jesus' thought.
- Specific context is John 3:13-15 which says [READ 3:13-15]. When v.14 talks about the SOM being "*lifted up*," Jesus is talking about his being nailed and lifted up on the cross and dying. So, what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us is: "**I'm not like you; I came from heaven; I did not come here to engender warm, fuzzy feelings; instead, I came here because you—and everyone else—are living under a death sentence, and not just physical death but what the Bible calls the "second death," the lake of fire of eternal judgment to which you will surely go; but I have come to change that: I am going to do for you what you cannot do for yourself—I am going die on the cross and pay the price for your sins, which you could never pay yourself; and if you want to have eternal life and enter the KOG, you need to believe in me.**" That is what v. 16 is summarizing. That's what **John 3:16** is all about.

**O/S:** We are going to look at both of the phrases that make up **John 3:16** and see how they fit together. The first phrase focuses on God; the second phrase focuses on people. Then we will see what that implies for our lives.

### **I. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.**

This tells us that God gave the most precious, valuable thing he could possibly give to demonstrate how much he loves us. The Bible makes clear that God is Trinity: there is only one God but he is in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many people find this hard to understand, and there is, indeed, a mystery to it. But I think the *idea* of Trinity is reasonably understandable. **3-dimensional object --- lemon tea** (In our ECLEA book on *Christianity & Islam* we have a lengthy section explaining the Trinity; you can find it on the "ECLEA Courses & Resources" page of the ECLEA website: [www.eclea.net](http://www.eclea.net))

The Bible says that God is Spirit. You can't divide a spirit into thirds. When v. 16 says that "**he gave his only Son,**" that is telling us that God really gave *himself*. The second person of the Trinity—Jesus Christ—became a human being to do for us what we never could do for ourselves.

Why did he do that? The reason is indicated in the second phrase of **John 3:16** which says that:

### **II. Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**

We all have a problem. This problem is more deadly and dangerous than we realize, and it goes all the way back to the beginning of history. **Gen 2:16-17** says, "**the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'**" Adam and Eve did eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but what happened to them did not affect only themselves. Instead, the death that became a part of them, they passed on to every person that followed them, including us.

The problem is not just that we all will physically die. My atheist friends think that when you die, you simply cease to exist. But that's not true. We all will continue to exist after this life in this body ends. The real problem is what the Bible calls the "second death," what is also called the "lake of fire" or "outer darkness" or "eternal punishment, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." That will go on forever. Last week we talked about the sheep and the goats in **Matthew 25**. At the end of that passage, Jesus says that the goats "**will go away into eternal punishment.**"

Can't we fix that? The answer is, "No, we can't." Why not? The reason goes back to the problem we all have. In **John 3:19** Jesus said, "**this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.**" Paul says the same thing in **Rom 3:10-12**, "**None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.**" In those passages, God has diagnosed the problem of humanity as we are naturally.

Our problem stems from what the Bible calls "indwelling sin." This sin is a power; it lives in us; it warps our minds, our feelings and emotions, our will and our actions. That's why Jesus said, "**It's not what goes into you that defiles you, it's what comes out of you—out of your heart—that defiles you**"—things like evil thoughts, lusts, murders, slander, theft, everything.

You see, our problem is deeper than we think—it goes to the very core of our being, our heart—and we can't change our heart no matter how hard we try. Let me show you why this problem of indwelling sin is so dangerous: it's so dangerous because it is so subtle and hidden. What do I mean? When Jesus said, "**people loved the darkness rather than the light**" and Paul said, "**no one does good, not even one,**" most of us think, "**That's really kind of an overstatement. Yes, I've done a few bad things in my life, but I'm basically a pretty good person and most of the people I know are good people. I don't 'love darkness' at all.**"

When we think about this, we all tend to compare ourselves to people who are obviously worse than us—Hitler, Stalin, or even garden variety criminals. We haven't done those things, so by comparison we're pretty good. What we don't realize is that it is the power of indwelling sin which causes us to set up a *false standard* for comparison and then causes us to think that we meet the standard. But the *true* standard of comparison is *not* other people. God does not grade on a curve. Adolf Hitler does not set the standard.

Instead, Jesus said in **Matt 5:48**, "**You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" You see, the Bible says that every human being was made in the image of God; therefore, our standard for comparison is not Adolf Hitler but God himself—and if you want to know what that looks like for human beings, our standard for comparison is Jesus Christ, because Jesus *is* God who came to earth as a human being.

So what does all this have to do with "**believing in Jesus so that we will not perish but have eternal life**"? God is perfect. The Bible also says that "**God is love.**" He is perfectly loving and holy (by which I mean without sin or moral imperfection); he is perfectly just, compassionate, and merciful; he is generous, wise, and perfectly good.

Can any of us say that about ourselves? The Bible says that "**people look to the outside, but God looks at the heart.**" How often do we really look *deeply* at what we are really like on the inside—in the deepest corners of our heart and mind where the sun rarely shines? If you are a Republican, when you think of Democrats, the Democrat party, or Gov. Evers, is your mind filled with thoughts of love? If you're a Democrat, when you think of Republicans, the Republican party, or Donald Trump, is your mind filled with thoughts of love?

Or consider this: Have you ever lusted after a person of the other sex? Jesus says you are an adulterer at heart. Have you ever been angry with someone or called or called someone names—maybe while driving your car? Jesus says you are a murderer at heart. Have you ever stolen anything? That makes you a thief. After all, if you only murder one person, that makes you a murderer; you can't defend yourself in court by saying, "**But look at all the people I didn't kill or look at all the things I didn't steal.**" To put it another way, when Jesus said "**people loved the darkness rather than the light,**" we need to understand that there are many ways of darkness: any life—even an outwardly "good" one—that does not love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and does not love your neighbor as you love yourself—is the way of darkness, because it is putting yourself at the center and marginalizing both God and the people who have been made in the image of God.

That is why we cannot save ourselves by doing good deeds or choosing to reform, because sin is in us and has become a part of us. As Jesus said, the standard we are held to is perfection—but once a person sins, it is impossible to ever be perfect—and we've all sinned in thought, word, and deed many times. For that matter, we can't even keep our own standards, let alone God's. And even our good deeds are tainted with sin and

typically arise from mixed motives. So if we are trying to go to heaven by doing good deeds, that alone makes our good deeds *not* “good.” Why? Because then the *motive* for our deeds is selfish and self-centered. Therefore, no amount of good deeds can atone for our sins, since they themselves are tainted with sin.

That is why we need Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus is the one mediator between God and people. What is a mediator? A mediator is someone who brings two parties who are at odds together. A good mediator has to be able to relate to both parties. That’s why Jesus had to be God—to relate to God. And that’s why Jesus had to be a human being—to relate to us. That’s also why Jesus never sinned—in thought, word, or deed—he was perfect, just as the Father in heaven is perfect. So he lived the life we should have lived. That qualified him to step into our shoes, die the death, and pay the price for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay. To receive the forgiveness and eternal life he brings, all we have to do is believe in him, as **John 3:16** says. Believe in who he is and what he has done; repent of our self-centered lives and turn to him. Ask him to come inside of you, be the Lord of your life, and start working in you to change you and make you more like himself.

### **III. If we believe in Jesus, what does that imply for our lives?**

**John 3:16** says, “Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” When we think of “eternal life,” most of us think of living in heaven and on the new earth forever. And that, of course, is true. But, fundamentally, “eternal life” is not just living for a very long, long, long, long time. It’s not a *quantity* of life so much as a *quality* of life. IOW, “eternal life” is a different *kind* of life. It is the life of *Jesus* being lived out in us.

Remember, last week we talked about the fact that when we come to faith in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit who actually comes to live inside of us. We receive the same Holy Spirit as Jesus had. When we come to Jesus and receive him as the Lord of our life, we become what is known as being “saved.” But then, in **Philippians 2**, the apostle Paul says that we are to “**work out our own salvation.**” IOW, we are to live our lives with Jesus as our new frame of reference. The Holy Spirit will guide us and work in us to change us. Because the Holy Spirit is now in us, Paul says in **Phil 2:13**, “**it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**” As a result of this, Jesus’ life, his values, his priorities, his will, his love, his compassion, become our lives, our values, our priorities, our will, our love, our compassion. *That* is the goal of our faith, of “believing in Jesus.” As Paul puts it in **Rom 8:29**, “**Those whom he [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [Jesus Christ].**” As we become conformed to the image of Jesus, it will affect what we do with our money, our time, and how we treat people. In fact, what we do with our money, our time, and how we treat people shows whether or not we *are* being conformed to the image of Jesus.

So what does this specifically imply for our lives? That gets us back to the first half of **John 3:16**: “**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.**” The key implication for our lives is that now we begin to live lives of love. Just as God *is* love, and God so loved the world by sending Jesus, so now we are to love people just as God in Christ has done.

- How central is love? So central is love that Jesus said that the entire Bible is founded on just two commandments, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,*” and “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Think of this: If Jesus really is the new center of our life, more and more he will be on our mind. And just as he loved us, as we think of him—the sum total of all perfection and all goodness—we will begin loving him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind. And “*love our neighbor as ourselves*”: do you realize how radical that is? It means that now, we love ourselves supremely. But as the Holy Spirit works in us and changes us, we will start loving our neighbor with as much time, thought, energy, and money as we now spend on ourselves. Love is practical; it affects every area of our life.
- How central is love? So central is love that in **1 John 4:8** the apostle John said, “*the one who does not love does not know God,*” and in **1 John 4:20** he added, “*If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*” The reason is that since all people are made in the image of God, how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of God himself. God is not fooled by lip-service. That’s why he puts people in our path every day. Because every day, how we interact with people really is showing what we really think of Jesus. Think about that.
- How central is love? So central is love that on the night before He died, in **John 13:34-35**, Jesus gave His disciples a “new commandment,” to “*love one another, even as I have loved you.*” Then he added that that “love for one another” is the *one sign* by which “*all men will know that you are My disciples.*” So how

did Jesus love us? I would say, first, he loves us *equally*: He didn't play favorites. He loved women as well as men; Gentiles as well as Jews; the marginalized as well as the powerful; the poor as well as the rich; the uneducated as well as the educated. Second, he loves us *truly*: He didn't just say he loved us, but he demonstrated it practically—when people were sick, he healed them; when people were hungry, he fed them. And, above all, he loved us *sacrificially*: he gave everything he had to restore us to fellowship with God and one another.

How are we doing in these areas? How much are we playing favorites? How practical is our love? How sacrificial is our love? How much is it costing us? God so loved the world that he gave everything he had so that we would have, not a life of darkness and death, but a radiant, new, divinely filled and divinely led life of love. That's what **John 3:16** is all about. There was a hymn written in the 1960s which says, "**they'll know we are Christians by our love.**" Can that be said of us, as a church? And, let each one of us ask ourselves, can that be said of *me* as an individual?

**CONCL:** **John 3:16** may be the most important verse in the Bible. It really summarizes the entire gospel. But we have to take it into us. If we really believe what **John 3:16** says, it will—slowly by slowly—start becoming obvious as we work out its implications in our lives. Just as God in Christ loved us, so we are all called to love the Lord our God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Let it truly be said of us, "**they'll know we are Christians by our love.**"