

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **For God So Loved the World. . . .**

John 3:1-21

It's there to greet you as soon as you walk in the church door. The gospel, in the shape of a cross, on the far wall. "For God so loved the world. . . ." Many of you can finish it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The great church reformer Martin Luther called this verse "the gospel in a nutshell." It gathers up many of the basics of our relationship with God in a memorable and portable format. A single verse that has stood the test of time.

A. Larry Ross, whose firm handled media and public relations for the Billy Graham organization, has noted how Billy Graham was able to take all sorts of situations and turn them into an opportunity for a gospel witness. Ross says,

I cut my teeth in the corporate world before I worked with Mr. Graham, and I set up numerous media interviews. Almost always before a TV interview, they do a microphone check, and they ask the interviewee to say something—anything—so they can adjust the audio settings. Often a corporate executive, for that check, will count to ten, say their ABC's, or recite what he had for breakfast. Mr. Graham would always quote John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

When I asked Mr. Graham why he does that, he replied, "Because that way, if I am not able to communicate the gospel clearly during the interview, at least the cameraman will have heard it."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you heard it from a Billy Graham broadcast. Or from a pastor, a Sunday School teacher, a parent, a VBS helper, or a children's sermon leader, especially our own Don Bazzle.

The main thing is, you've heard it. You know it. But knowing it can be a double-edged thing. On the upside, being familiar with John 3:16 can mean that it has gotten deeply into you, shaping the way you believe and behave. But on the downside, familiarity can mean that you take this text for granted, assuming that you already know most of what you need to know. "John 3:16? Oh yes, I already know that one."

When it comes to having a fresh wind of the Spirit blow into your life, knowledge, that sense of contentment with your current set of convictions, can sometimes be an obstacle. Take Nicodemus, whose dialogue with Jesus comprises the first half of today's text, before we even get to verse 16. Nicodemus comes to Jesus and starts the conversation by talking about what he and some of the other religious leaders already know, especially about Jesus himself. As the dialogue unfolds, we see that Nicodemus's previous knowledge and categories of thought are actually an obstacle to hearing and receiving Jesus' testimony to the new thing God is doing. If Nicodemus is going to be born of water and the Spirit, born again, born from above, then he can't just stay put with what's already familiar to him.

From there, Jesus goes on to talk about resistance to who he is and what he's doing, culminating in his declaration that he offers his own life to make eternal life possible for those who believe. That's when we actually get to the memorable verse 16: "For God so loved the world. . . ." Notice that this "gospel in a nutshell" begins with an affirmation that the source of our relationship with God is first and foremost God's love for us. Throughout the Scriptures, this is God's most fundamental characteristic. God loves. In other words, God wills and acts for the good and the wholeness of humankind, and the entire creation. John 3:16 doesn't say, "For God is so out to get you that. . . ." Or, "For God is so eager to vent his anger and punish you that. . . ." Or, "For God is so determined to destroy the world that. . . ." No, God's intention for us is life and flourishing and well-being. God loves. And according to John 3:16, the full and decisive manifestation of God's love for the world is the sending of the Son, Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world. . . ." The adverb usually translated as "so" or "so much," which conveys a sense of the degree of God's love, can also be rendered as "in this way," which captures the manner of God's love. "For God expressed His love for the world in this way: He gave His only Son. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Remember that in today's text, we're just three chapters into a story that began with John announcing that "the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (1:14a). As author Glenn Stanton has put it, "We serve a God who created our humanity, weeps at the fall of our humanity, became our humanity, and is redeeming our humanity." According to John 3:16, God's love isn't a theological abstraction, or an idea that dwells in the heavens. No, God's love has taken on visible, human form in the coming of the Son, into the world.

And what is this "world" that God so loves? There have been plenty of debates and discussions about that topic too. "World" can be a way of referring to the totality of God's creation, with particular emphasis on how God loves all people without exception. From this angle, "world" is about the breadth, the vastness of God's love. Or it could be that "world" has more to do with the quality of God's love. Keep in mind that in John's Gospel, "world" usually refers to people who are at odds with Jesus and God. The "world" is a realm where darkness has the upper hand, and sinful humanity is hostile to God, resistant to God's will and purpose. So as one commentator has put it, we might capture better the unfathomable love of God by translating, "For God so loved the *God-hating* world. . . !"<sup>3</sup> That way we don't fall under the spell of thinking that God's love is basically a Valentine from above. On the contrary, we recognize God's love for what it truly is, the grace-filled, underserved, reconciling action of a God whose will is to save us.

Preacher David Lose tells about a member of his congregation whose six-year-old son Benjamin was protesting his bedtime. After resisting and resisting, Benjamin could see that Daddy wasn't going to budge. So he said in frustration, "Daddy, I hate you!" Dad replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you." To which Benjamin answered, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Dad continued, "Ben—but it's true, I love you." "Don't say that, Daddy." "But I love you, Ben." "Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!" And then came Daddy's critical answer: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you . . . like it or not!"<sup>4</sup>

God's love for us isn't conditioned on anything that we do. John 3:16 doesn't say, "For God so loved the world because we've earned it." Or, "For God so loved the world because we've longed for it." Or, "For God so loved the world because we've sought it." Instead, God loves the world in spite of. In spite of our sin. In spite of our resistance. In spite of our rejection. In spite of our alienation from him and from one another. God loves us, and all the world . . . like it or not! Nothing can undo what God did by becoming flesh. Nothing can reverse what God set in motion by sending the Son. Nothing can void what God accomplished through the cross. God's sovereign love isn't something that comes at our

invitation or with our permission. God, out of love, through the Son, simply comes, and gives himself to us in the death of Jesus.

Les and Leslie Parrott have written about how the very character of God makes possible our relationship with God. They say:

Consider the sun as an analogy. The sun only shines, just as God only loves. It is the nature of the sun to shine, to offer warmth and light. And it is the nature of God to love. We are free to get away from the sun—we can lock ourselves in a dark room—but we do not keep the sun from shining just because we put ourselves in a place where it cannot reach us.<sup>5</sup>

Like Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night and encounters the very one who is light, we here today need to put ourselves in the presence of God, stepping out of our darkness and into the light of his love, in order to hear and experience anew the depth and breadth of God's self-giving for our salvation. And to reflect on, and make choices about, what we're going to do with this God who loves so fully, freely, and sovereignly.

Yes, God's love for us is unconditional and undeserved. But that doesn't mean there's nothing for you to do, or that you have no part to play in the relationship God has made possible by giving His one and only Son. You have decisions to make about how you're going to respond to this love, and what you're going to do with it in your life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, *that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*"

"That" or "so that" tells us that what follows is God's purpose, God's agenda. God's agenda, driven by love and revealed in the Son, is to share divine life with the world. And by believing in the Son you receive and experience this life that is in him. This life is eternal not just in the sense of future but in the sense of a relationship with God, a relationship that can't be severed by sin or destroyed by death. A relationship that can begin in the here and now, by faith. The alternative is to reject the love of God revealed in the Son, to conceal yourself from the light of Christ, and face everlasting destruction, separation from the presence of God.

N. T. Wright retells a story about three misbehaving young boys who decided, just for a laugh, to go into a church and one by one enter the confessional and confess to all sorts of outrageous sins that they claimed to have committed. The priest, being an experienced guide, saw through their prank pretty quickly. The first two boys ran out of the church laughing. But the priest hung on to the third one, and said, "Okay, you've confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face and say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.' And I want you to do that three times."

So the boy went up to the front, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, "You did all that for me and I don't care that much." And then he said it again. But then couldn't say it the third time because he broke down in tears. The archbishop telling the story said, the reason I know that story is because I was that young man. As N. T. Wright stresses, there's something about the cross that leaps over all our theoretical debates, discussions, and explanations, and grasps us. And what is grasping us, what is grasping you, is the love of God.<sup>6</sup>

"For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Here is a God who loves, who comes to us of his

own free choice, to rescue us from destruction. His saving appearance calls for a choice of your own. What will you do with the Son? What will you do with this love that gives life?

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 71-72.

<sup>2</sup> *The Voice New Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) 165.

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, Commentary on John 3:1-17. Working Preacher website. March 20, 2011. Accessed February 7, 2018 <[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=903](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=903)>.

<sup>4</sup> David Lose, "John 3:16, Like It or Not!" Working Preacher website. March 20, 2011. Accessed February 7, 2018 <[http://day1.org/2857-john\\_316\\_like\\_it\\_or\\_not](http://day1.org/2857-john_316_like_it_or_not)>.

<sup>5</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott, *Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 172.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, "Grasped By the Love of God." N. T. Wright Online. Accessed February 8, 2018 <<http://ntwrightonline.org/grasped-love-god/>>.