

## The Greatest Text on the Greatest Truth!

John 3:16

The Gospel According to John

Series #18

**Introduction:** Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 3, the Gospel of John, chapter 3. You hardly need to open your Bible this morning to know the text that is before us. John 3:16 says – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

140 years ago, a 40-year-old man was laid to rest in England after a long struggle with a heart condition. This man died in the full assurance of God’s love for him, but he had not always lived that way. He grew up in a Methodist household, but at the age of 12 started working in a shipping house where he met some unsavory friends and his life soon was given over to the desires of the flesh. After a short stint in the army to try and reform him, his father had to pay a hefty sum to free him from that commitment and his life was given over to alcohol and parties. One night he found himself wandering the streets of London and saw a big crowd gathering. He thought it was one of the great parties he loved so much, but it turned out that it was a gospel meeting. The Scripture reading that night was from Luke 15 – the prodigal son and the loving father. The name of Jesus pierced this young man’s heart and he rushed home but was still lost in his sins. After a few weeks of struggling, he found a Christian friend to talk to and that friend shared Romans 10:9-10 with him and called him to believe in his heart that Jesus is Lord and to confess him with his mouth that God has raised him from the dead and he would be saved. And he was gloriously saved from his sin. He settled down, got married, had a daughter, and was successful at business. But the Lord used a bold preacher who confronted him about using his talents in auctioneering for the Lord and winning souls. And so, he set out to become an evangelist – preaching on the street, setting up meetings in rented halls – whatever he could do to gain a hearing with the lost.

One day, he heard that the great evangelist, D.L. Moody was in town and would be speaking. He of course wanted to meet the most renowned evangelist of the day, and upon meeting Moody he said to him, “I’ll preach for you in America!” Moody was surprised by the bold offer, but agreed that if he ever found himself in Chicago, he could have his pulpit. Of course, Moody never thought this man would make it to Chicago from London. Until one day, months later, he got a telegram from this man letting him know he was in New York and would be in Chicago on Sunday. Well, Moody was going to be gone that coming Sunday preaching at another church, so he hesitantly agreed to let the man preach in his pulpit. He assured his deacons that if it didn’t go well, he would clean up the mess when he got back in town. And then he said, “and who knows, if he does alright, maybe you will have him preach again.” Well, Moody arrived back in town after his meetings and immediately asked his wife how the young preacher had done. And she said, “He has preached two sermons from John 3:16, and I think you will like him, although he preached a little different from what you do.”

“How is that?”

“Well, he tells sinners God loves them.”

Moody wasn’t so sure about that; but that evening he went to hear Moorhouse preach. He once again preached from John 3:16 and expounded once again on the great love of God for sinners. Moody said later that he never knew before then how much God loved us. “This heart of mine began to thaw out, and I could not keep back the tears. It was like news from a far country. I just drank it in.” D.L. Moody was never the same, and his presentation of the good news was forever impacted by this young preacher. Henry Moorhouse has been

described as the man who moved the man who moved millions. As he lay on his deathbed he said to his friends, “If it were the Lord’s will to raise me again, I should like to preach from the text, ‘God so loved the world.’”

If you are anything like me, this text has lost that wonder and amazement for you. You have heard it from your earliest memory and its constant repetition have kept you from recognizing its greatness. We use that word a lot don’t we – the word “great.” And usually when we say it, we overstate the case. We say, “wow, that meal was great.” When in reality, it was probably just pretty good. Or we say, “that was a great book, or a great movie, or a great \_\_\_\_\_.” But if everything is great, then nothing is. But when we come to this text, we are understating the case when we use the words great and greatest. This is truly the greatest text on the greatest truth. These 25 words in the Greek, and 24 in the ESV are the metropolis of truth. All highways of truth intersect in this one great text, extolling to us the greatest of truths – that God loves the world! There is no greater truth for us to ponder and there is no greater text to lead us into the heavenly glories of God’s love for us.

So, listen to the text again, and may the Lord grant you to hear it with fresh ears of faith.

There is endless treasure to be mined here in this text. All of the pillars of the Gospel are found in this text. God is presumed to be the Creator God and the Sovereign One. Man is presented in this verse as being under the curse of sin because apart from Christ Jesus he will perish. And Jesus is proclaimed as the Son who is sent by God as the gift of ultimate love for lost sinners. And the response to all of this is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and have eternal life. Here is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is that simple. And yet, it is eternally and infinitely more profound.

As I considered this text with fresh eyes, I was helped by a commentator who pointed me to 5 pairs of important words. All of these words are their own highway of truth, but they intersect here in this metropolis of truth. Each word is like a bright shining star in the constellation of God’s truth. And when you draw the lines together you see the bright glory of his love for sinners. The first pair of important words from this greatest text on the greatest truth points us to the greatest relationship.

### **I. The Greatest Relationship (*Father – Son*)**

- a. We see this greatest relationship in those two supremely important words, “God” and “Son.” For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son! In verses 1-15 we were reading the direct words of Jesus to Nicodemus. But there are not quotation marks in the original, so it is not always clear where the speech of Jesus ends and the explanation of John the apostle begins. But most likely, the words of verse 16 are the words of John giving us more truth to help us understand the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus. John is aptly named the apostle of love because he speaks of love more than any other of the gospel writers. And he is helping us understand the cross of verses 14-15. Jesus has just told Nicodemus that just as it was necessary for Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. John wants us to understand why the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. It is because God so loved the world. It was necessary because God sent Jesus to the world to save sinners.
- b. And this love is more fully understood when we see the relationship between the Father and the Son in this verse. John does not say, For the Father so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” because he is talking about God in relationship to the world. But we know the relationship between God the Son and God the Father here because God gave his only Son. The magnitude of the love God has for the world can only be rightly understood when you consider this greatest of relationships – that of God the Father to God the Son to God the Spirit – the Triune God. They are One in being and essence and three in person – Father, Son, and Spirit. And in this perfection of relationship between the Triune God there is perfection of love. In 3:35 we are told that the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. In 14:31 we are told that the Son loves

the Father and therefore does all that the Father command him to do. In 17:24 he prays to the Father and expresses that the Father has loved him before the foundation of the world. So, we know that this perfection of love between the three members of the Triune Godhead is the eternal well of love out of which the Son was sent into the world.

- c. In other words, this love God has for the world is not something new and strange thing to his character. No, God is love, and before this is seen in the sending of the Son into the world it is seen in the greatest of relationship between God the Father and God the Son in eternity past. Only this God who knew this perfect love could be a God who could express such love as this to a world where no such love was known. We can't understand the greatness of the gift until we understand the greatness of this relationship. Jesus was the only begotten Son of God. This is not talking about origin, but about the uniqueness of quality. There is no other like Jesus. He is the only one of his kind. And it is this unique, one-of-a-kind Son who is given out of this relationship of divine love by the Father for the world.

## II. The Greatest Gift (*Loved – Gave*)

- a. And it is out of this greatest relationship that we see the giving of this greatest gift. And we see that in those two words – Loved and gave. God loved in this way – he gave his only Son. We know the intensity and the extent and the definition of his love by this act of giving – this greatest gift. It is relatively easy to speak words of love. It is even relatively easy to make commitments of love. But it is in the expression of love that this love is truly known. A husband's love for his wife is not most evident on their wedding day when everything is perfect, and they are both as happy as can be. Rather, his love is more clearly defined and known 25 years in when she is paralyzed in a car accident and he gives his life to her constant care. This is where his love is truly displayed.
- b. And so, it is with God. He does not simply tell us he loves us. He does not simply commit to loving us. But rather, he makes known the quality and the extent and the nature of his love through the giving of His only Son. As we make our way through John's Gospel, we will come across this idea of love many times. Particularly in chapters 13-17 we will see an emphasis on the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's love for the Father, and Jesus' love for his disciples. The disciples will be instructed to love one another as they have been loved by Jesus. And they are to love Jesus by abiding in him and by obeying his commandments. But all of that is built upon this statement at the beginning of this gospel – God loved the world in this way that he gave his only Son!
- c. Jesus will say in 15:13 – Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. In 1 John 3:16, the text says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us." In 1 John 4:9-10 it says, "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. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Romans 5:8 says that God "shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"
- d. This is the greatest expression of the greatest love. There is no greater love and there is no greater expression of this love. God's love is greater than any other love ever known. And this love of God is displayed by this greatest expression – this giving of His only Son.
- e. How do you know if God loves you? And this is a super important question, isn't it? How do you know God loves you? So many professing Christians today would say that they know God loves them because he accepts them and approves of them as they are. The thought goes like this – God made me and therefore he made me this way with these desires and therefore God loves me enough to accept me as I am, or as I desire to be. And anyone who tells me that what I want or

who I want to become does not line up with God's truth and is merely an expression of my sinful desire, well, then that person is not loving and must be put out of my life.

- f. And this is not unique to our age. This has always been the work of the deceiver – Satan himself – to re-define love so as to re-define God. Isn't this what he did with Eve in the Garden when he questioned what God has said about the forbidden fruit? When Satan re-interpreted that for Eve and told her that God told her she couldn't eat of that fruit because he was keeping her from becoming like Him – Satan was questioning the love of God for Eve. And that is the skill of deception he has continued to craft. He has convinced a whole generation raised in the church that their parents and SS teachers and pastors didn't really love them because they didn't let them have their way and become who they wanted to be.
- g. But this text clearly defines love by what God gives, not by what God allows and accepts. In fact, it is in the giving of His Son that he is affirming again that he will not finally approve of those who are enslaved to sin. This is why he sent His Son. If sin wasn't a problem, and if your sinful desires don't condemn you before a righteous and holy God, then there is no need for love, is there? There was no need for Jesus to be sent into the world if God's love is defined as acceptance of us as we were. No, Jesus came into the world to save us from that. And in this we know the love of God.
- h. Not only does this greatest gift of God's love define his love for us, but it also displays the quality and the extent of his love. In other words, we not only know the type of love he has for us, but we also know the extent to which that love will go in loving us. And this is really important because it is extremely easy to examine God's love for me on some lower plane than this greatest of gifts in Jesus Christ. So, as we approach Christmas, this is an especially easy observation. I remember as a kid anticipating Christmas and feeling more loved by them when I got from them what I wanted for Christmas. But this is ludicrous isn't it? In my immaturity and childlike understanding, I was missing the greater expressions of my parent's love – things like their loving discipline and their constant provision and protection and their sacrifice to meet my needs and to give me amazing opportunities for growth and so many more. But those were easy to miss in my self-centered world view that wondered – “what have you done for me lately?”
- i. And we are no different in our view of our Lord's love either, are we? How easy it is for us to feel as though God doesn't love us, or at least isn't loving us well right now if we are not getting some expression of that love just as we want it in that moment. We are prone to define the quality and extent of God's love for us based on his latest gift to us. But Romans 8 teaches us differently, doesn't it?
  - i. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? – Romans 8:31-35

### III. The Greatest Scope (*World – Whoever*)

- a. This greatest gift of love is given to the greatest scope possible. And we see that in the two words of “world” and “whoever.” And this is a scandalous statement if you are thinking at all. We are so familiar with this truth that we don't really consider what's being said here. Jesus has just finished a conversation with Nicodemus who was the teacher of Israel. It was an obvious truth that God loved the Jewish people. They were his chosen people. Remember from our study of Deuteronomy that he made clear to them his love and told them that he did not love them because they were so lovely, but because he had set his love on them. And then we see that love tested and proven all throughout the Old Testament as they turn from faithfulness to the Lord

again and again. But what do they always find when they return? A loving God! So, it is an obvious statement at this point in John 3 to say that God loves the Jews.

- b. But the scope of God's love here widens to a universal scope. And this is scandalous in the Jewish mind. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son! His love is not restricted to one ethnicity or one people group. His love is for the whole world. And this is seen in the giving of his only Son. This is an astounding thought in light of the sea of humanity that has ever lived and will ever live. But the emphasis in the immediate context is not on the amount of people, but on the rejection and wickedness of the people. The light has come into the world – Jesus himself – and they have rejected the light because they loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. This is the scandalous love of God – that he loves people who are like that – people who love darkness rather than light and whose deeds are evil.
- c. The offer of salvation is broad enough in its scope that it includes the worst of sinners from the most unlikely of places. How else do you explain the sending of the prophet Jonah to Israel's enemy – the Ninevites – who were the most evil and barbaric people of Jonah's day? Only the love of God can make sense of God's pardoning of their guilt when they repented and turned to Him! How do you explain the self-righteous Nicodemus whose righteousness was as filthy rags in the eyes of God? But God's love extends even to one like Nicodemus so that he was finally humbled and left all his religious achievements to be numbered among Christ's disciples – this is love! How else do you make sense of Saul of Tarsus, who later in life will describe himself as the chief of sinners? There was no greater enemy of God's work in the early church than Saul. And yet, God's love extended to him and he was born again and brought into the light of divine truth about Jesus as the Christ. How else do you explain the story of the prodigal son? Is that not an expression of the great love of the Father extending to the most heinous and wicked of sinners?
- d. So, this love is broad in its scope, but it is also limited to whoever believes in Jesus. This love is not known and experienced by everyone, but only by those who believe. Jesus himself will say in John 6:37 – the one who comes to me I will in no wise cast out. But we are also told right here in chapter 3 that those who do not come in faith will be forever condemned. So, in verse 18 it says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." And then in verse 36 it says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."
- e. We are in the world and of the world when the love of God comes upon us and has its glorious effect. In John 15 as Jesus is preparing his disciples for his own death on the cross is telling them about their relationship to the world – "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (Jn. 15:19)
- f. This is the only option God has if he is going to love anyone – he must love those who are in the world, and by his love he takes them out of the world and makes them His own. So friend, there is no greater hope for you than this love of God. It doesn't matter how deep in the world you have been – God's love is greater than your sin. It doesn't matter how far you have run away from God, his love is more persistent than your pursuit of sin. Turn to him today in saving faith in His Son. The Lord Jesus Christ was given so that you could be brought from death to life in him!

#### IV. The Greatest Security (*Believes – Have*)

- a. This greatest gift then provides us with the greatest security. We see that in the two words "believes" and "have." That whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life. The simplicity of belief in the Lord Jesus brings the greatest security possible – that you now have eternal life. This faith in Christ is the major theme of John's Gospel. Remember, that is

why he is writing to us – so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name.

- b. This is believing in the sense of agreeing and totally trusting. It is agreeing that Jesus is the Messiah – the promised One. That he is the one sent from God – the only Son of God. That his being lifted up on the Cross of Calvary is enough to save you from the consequence and curse and condemnation of your sin. Like the ones who were bit by the serpent in the wilderness in Numbers 21 – they simply had to look at the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses to live. So too, sinner, you simply must look to Jesus lifted up on the Cross and see in Him your only hope and your sure salvation.
- c. And this glorious text tells you that this saving faith brings the greatest security. You have eternal life. God's love is such that you can never be plucked from His hand. His love is unfailing and steadfast. He does not love you one way yesterday and another way tomorrow. He has shown you the greatness of his love in the sending of his Son. And this will never change. Therefore, if you have experienced this love and have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ to save you, then you have the greatest security possible – you have eternal life! Oh, what love!

#### V. The Greatest Promise (*Not Perish – Eternal Life*)

- a. And this leads ultimately to the greatest promise. This greatest promise is seen in those two phrases “should not perish” and “eternal life.” No communication about the love of God is accurate without the clear truth that apart from his love you are perishing. You are not born into this world in a right standing with God. Ephesians 2:3 says that we are by nature objects of God's wrath. Romans 1:18 tells us that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
- b. This means that if we physically die in this state of ungodliness and unrighteousness then we will eternally perish. For the wages of sin is death – eternal and unending and unchanging death. At the end of time and on the brink of eternity there will be a judgment of the living and the dead known as the Great White Throne judgment. Revelation 20:14-15 describes it this way: “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”
- c. This is what it means to perish. It means to be forever separated from the grace and love of God in an eternal state of conscious torment and punishment. It is the exact opposite of eternal life. And eternal life is defined by Jesus in John 17:3 as knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent. Being eternally alive with God will be all about knowing and being with God in conscious bliss where the joys will never end, and the pleasures of God will never cease. And this is the great promise of God's love. Indeed, this is the greatest promise possible, and it is brought to the human heart by the greatest love ever expressed. This greatest love ever expressed is shown to us by the greatest gift ever given – that of the only Son of God. And this greatest love expressed in this greatest gift flows out of the greatest relationship.

**Conclusion:** And all of this provides the greatest comfort and the greatest motivation. If God loves you in this way, by the sending of His Son to give you eternal life through his being lifted up on the cross to pay for your sins – then there is no problem or difficulty or trial or trouble that is not comforted by this love. If God did not spare his own Son, will he not also give you all things in accordance to that same love? If he has loved you in this way, will he not love you in every other way as well? What can separate us from the love of Christ? There is no anxiety this love does not answer. There is no trouble this love does not overcome. There is no fear this love does not conquer. There is no enemy this love does not defeat. There is no greater comfort.

There is also no greater motivation. If God has loved you in this way, then there is no greater antidote to your self-preserving apathy. Christians have long found that the only fuel which will ignite the flame of passionate

zeal for God is the fuel of His own love for us seen in the sending of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why Paul will say in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 – “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

At the end of Henry Moorhouse’s weeklong series of preaching on this text he said this: “I have been trying to tell you how much God loves you. Suppose I could borrow Jacob’s ladder. Suppose I could ascend that shining stairway until my feet stood on the sapphire pavements of the city of God. Suppose I could find Gabriel, the herald angel who stands in the presence of God. Suppose I could say, ‘Tell me, Gabriel, how much does God love the world?’ I know what he would say. He would say, ‘Henry Moorhouse, God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. That is how much God loves the world.’”<sup>1</sup>

Amen and amen!

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<sup>1</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of John*, pg. 73.