

“The Love of God”
John 3:16
Rev. Benny Parks
August 2, 2020 • Sunday Sermon

We are going to look at one verse in this study but I’d like to start by reading John 3:14–21 to give us some context. This is God’s Word. John 3:14–21 says [14] *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

[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. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] 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. [19] And 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. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. [21] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

The story of John 3 is a conversation that Jesus has with a well-known religious leader named Nicodemus. Jesus calls him the teacher of Israel. Their conversation centers around the nature of salvation. How is a person saved? How is a person made right with God? My wife and I have just finished watching 8th episode series called *The Chosen* and it’s about the life of Christ seen through the eyes of those around Him. It is very well done and I encourage you to download the app to watch it. Episode 7 in this series deals with this conversation that Jesus has with Nicodemus. It kind of speculates what Nicodemus must have been thinking and it’s a fascinating exchange. In the episode it show Jesus pointing, not to a new form of a religion that He is ushering in, but to Himself. That is what John 3:16 is all about.

Martin Luther called this one verse, the Bible in miniature. Millions of people can quote this verse. It’s one of, if not the most recognizable verse in all of Scripture. While it’s well-known it’s not well understood. I like what A.W. Pink says in his book, *The Attributes of God*. Pink says, ‘There are many today who talk about the love of God but are total strangers to the God of love.’ May that not be true of us today. The world more than ever needs God’s love spread from shore to shore.

Listen to how God’s Word has framed His love in I John 4:7–8 which says [7] *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.* Notice how our love for others flows from the love of God for us. It states that God is love. This is stating one of God’s great if not most glorious attributes. It is stating something that is true of God but not all of God.

Lately, my wife and I have been bemoaning the fact that we’re getting older. We have a lot more aches and pains in trying to do things. Oh to be young again! I came across this quote by Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher that speaks to that point. He talks about being children again but he uses it in a spiritual way but oh to go back to the health of a child. He says ‘Be children again, you who have long loved your Savior and your Lord. Take up your spelling book again and learn your ABC’s again. Learn again that God so loved the world that He gave

His Son to die that men and women may live through Him.’ May God cause us in childlike wonder once again to fall in love with the God of love.

We are going to look at this one verse this morning (John 3:16) with a simple outline. We are going to look at the depth of God’s love, the breadth of God’s love, the proof of God’s love, and then the power of God’s love. In John 3:16 the phrase ‘For God so loved...’ teaches us about the depth of God’s love. God not only loves us or loved us, but He SO loved us. ‘So’ is such a little/tiny word but it explains something so enormous. That is the unfathomable depth of God’s love. It is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, just like God Himself.

I’m reminded of the words of the hymn *O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus* which says;

*Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me.*

Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus, love of every, love the best. It reminds me of the hymn *Love Divine, All Love Excelling* by Charles Wesley which says;

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav'n to earth come down:
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown:
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter ev'ry trembling heart.*

Everything God does He does in love, nothing is separate from or contradictory to the love of God.

The whole Bible declares God’s love. The Psalmist talks about God’s love over and over again. Psalm 100:5 says [5] *For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.* The Apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 13:8 that ‘Love never ends,’ it never fails. We as believers can easily take for granted the love of God. We don’t do it purposefully. It’s just that we’ve heard about His love for so long that we forget that it is exactly what we long for. It’s what we need and we need to develop again that wonder of a little child as Spurgeon said as it defines our joy and happiness in the love of God—the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free. I’m sure that if we dwelt more on the deep love of Jesus more we would find much deeper joy, much deeper comfort, much deeper peace and hope in our lives.

We also see that God’s love is not only deep but it is wide. The breadth of God’s love is seen in this world. I love J.C. Ryle’s three volume commentary on the book of John. I used it years ago to develop a curriculum for our youth. It’s fantastic and Ryle explains this idea of God’s love for the world. He says it this way; ‘The true view of the words ‘God so loved the world’ I believe means this—it means that the world is the whole human race of mankind, both saints and sinners without exception.’ In other words, Ryle says that ‘God so loved the world’ means the whole world of saints and sinners.

This is important for us to remember because sometimes in reformed circles we hear that God does not love anyone but His own people—His elect—and Ryle addresses this further. Ryle says ‘It is a love unquestionably distinct and separate from the separate love which Gods regards for His saints but it is a real love nonetheless.’ I love this. We can understand that there are different depths of love. I can love all children but I love my children best and deeper. In a similar way God loves His own people in the deepest way but His love for all mankind is far more deeper than we could ever imagine and wide. His love is deep and wide.

What is really astounding is what we all know and the Bible teaches that God’s love for us is not based on anything in us. Nothing in us would attract God to us. As a matter of fact, everything in us would repulse God, repel Him from us. He is holy, we are sinful, evil and depraved. That is what makes God’s love so incomprehensible—is that He loves us that deeply in spite of that we’re flawed and sinful.

The unbelieving world rejects the truth of God’s love. Critics and despisers of Christianity often point to the problem of evil in this world and yet God desires the salvation of those very ones who despise Him. I Timothy 2:4 says *[4] who (God) desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.* That is the heart of God even for the lost. Take for instance, the atheist Sam Harris in his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Harris says ‘The problem of evil in this world is the old theodicy problem.’ Theodicy is the justification of God’s goodness and love in the presence of unspeakable evil. It is usually formulate like this, that is, if God is all loving than He would want to wipe out all evil and if God is all powerful then He could wipe out all evil but evil still exists therefore God is not all loving and not all powerful. This is what Harris believes. It is a common objection to Christianity.

Harris goes onto explain it this way; ‘Statistics show us that every few hours, at least every few days, a child is abducted, tortured and murdered. The same statistics also tell us that the same parents of that child believe in an all powerful and all loving God watching over them. Are they right to believe this? Is it good to believe this? No. The murder of one single child, even once in a million years casts doubt upon the idea that God is loving and all powerful.’

But does it cast doubt? God’s Word says God waits patiently for the most evil people to repent in this world, even those who despise Him, (II Peter 3:9) like Mr. Harris. Jesus says in Luke 15:10, *[10] Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.* This shows the unbelievable love of God. If God were to wipe out all the evil in this world He would wipe out right now, every Sam Harris, every Benny Parks, every human being and everything in this world but He doesn’t.

Certainly we can agree with Sam Harris that the problem of evil is real and if we were just to look at what is going on in this world we would probably not determine that there is an all loving and an all powerful God but God never tells us to look for the truth of His love by looking at what is going on in His world—this world which the Bible says lies in the power of the evil one. No, He says the proof is found, not in this evil, fallen world, but in the one Person who came to save men and women out of this evil, fallen world because He loved them and this is the fruit of His love.

This leads us to the third point which is the proof of God’s love is that He gave His only Son. If you have ever been in a Sunday school class when I have taught I Corinthians 13, which is about God’s love and how it is to transform us, change us and effects our relationships, then you have heard me give this example. Just a few months into my marriage I was running toward the door about to go out to work and I said ‘Bye Brenda, I love you’ to my wife and I didn’t hear anything. I knew she was in the kitchen so I thought maybe she didn’t hear me so I said the

same thing again, only louder and right as I was heading out the door I hear her say ‘Ha!’ For all you newly married guys that is not a good sign. I wanted to act like I didn’t hear that ‘ha’ and keep going but I paused and she said ‘Ha, you say you love me but you don’t show it.’ I closed the door in front of me, walked back into the kitchen and we talked about it.

It had only been a few months since we have been married—April 11, 1987—and just six months before that I had gotten on one knee and gave her my promise. Because I so loved Brenda I gave her my one and only diamond ring—the only one I’ve ever bought and the only one I’ve ever given. When I gave it to her I said ‘If you will trust me I will love you for the rest of our lives and I will never, ever, ever leave you.’ I think that meant a whole lot to her right then that I would always love her and never leave her. Fast forward a few months and she is thinking ‘I’m stuck with this guy the rest of my life, he’s never going to leave me, and says he loves me but he doesn’t show it.’ We worked through that crisis and we’ve been married 33 years so praise the Lord for that, but it does illustrate something very important and that is that we as humans are takers. We want what we want and we think we deserve to get what we want whenever.

One of my close friends kept sending me texts and emails and he would say ‘hey Freddie’ and I finally asked him ‘why do you keep calling me Freddie.’ He said ‘You’re Freddie the freeloader.’ Those who are my age will remember who Freddie the freeloader was. He was a character Redd Skeleton the comedian played on TV and he was always getting stuff for free. He also sent me pictures of that GEICO commercial of the alligator who would reach over acting like he was going to pay for everyone’s meal then not doing it and my friend was saying to me that I was the one who worked a lot harder to be the one to not have to pay for things when we’re together. We’re both pastors and I guess he thinks I work harder to do that. I think it was all in fun when he says things like that but I know that it’s just simply an illustration of how we all are takers in different ways.

On a more serious note to illustrate that, I like you have been struck by the racism hatred debate and vision that is going on in our country over so many things. One thing that we all have in common, whichever side we’re on, is that we all think we’re right and accurate in these things. We all want and believe what we deem is accurate and right is what we deserve to receive and that’s because at some level we’re all takers. We all think we’re the most virtuous, certainly way more virtuous than those who are on the opposite side of us. I’m not suggesting in any way that there aren’t some things more virtuous and some things that are more right and wrong, but I’m just making a point that in many ways that we are all takers—we want what we want. But God is a great giver that He so loved us that He didn’t give us a token diamond ring but He gave His only Son.

In John Stott’s great book, *The Cross of Christ*, he has a section titled “The Holy Love of God” and in that he quotes the great Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer who says this; ‘In the cross of Christ, God’s justice and love are simultaneously revealed.’ It is in the cross of Christ that God’s love and justice kiss each other. God’s justice demands that we are perfect. Matthew 5:48 says [48] *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* He says that anyone who does not keep everything in the law has a curse upon him (Galatians 3:10). But His Word tells us that Jesus lived a perfect life. He fulfilled righteousness perfectly and He actually became a curse for us. And He endured the wrath of God that we deserved for our sins for He took upon our sins on Himself upon the cross.

We have done a musical many times here at Briarwood called *Savior*. One of my favorite songs in that musical is titled “A Cross of Love” and my favorite line in that song is ‘this

must be a cross of love for God bruised His only Son' which comes from Isaiah 53. So it must be a cross of love for God to bruise His only Son. The cross of God is God's ultimate demonstration and proof of God's love for us. A.W. Pink says 'Whenever we are tempted to doubt God's love, Christian reader go back to Calvary.' Our love can be strong when people receive it well—when they receive our loving good intentions, instead of our terrible actions. It's when we give love to people and they receive what we meant to do, not what we actually did. Then when someone reciprocates and shows love to us then our love becomes stronger, not so with God. It is just the opposite.

Romans 5:8 says [8] *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* He loved us. Think about the cross and what was going on at the cross. There were mockers sneering, haters spitting, disciples weeping, a thief hoping and there was Jesus Christ loving all of them all the way. I John 4:10 says [10] *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.* He died the death that we deserved—the atoning death—and that's the proof of God's love.

Finally, we see the power of God's love that 'whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.' Let's go back to the beginning of John 3 and the story of Nicodemus. It says in John 3:14–15, [14] *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* This goes back to Moses and the bronze snake that was lifted up on a pole and what we know in this passage. That was a foreshadowing of the death of Christ and Him being lifted up for it was Him becoming sin for us. It was also Him being the satisfaction of sin for us. It's the terrible and glorious truth in one in salvation by atonement through Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God.

Michael Horton, in his book titled *In the Face of God*, he talks about our desire to see God. Horton says 'Would you really love, to see God in all of His glory and splendor, then look to the blood stained cross with flies, splinters, mockers, anger and with the Father forsaking His Son. It doesn't seem like a display of Divine power and glory for it seems like Divine weakness and failure yet everyone who looks upon this Son (represented by the bronze snake) is saved from sin's guilt and tyranny.' Isn't that great? That is awesome.

Now I want to discuss briefly perishing before believing in this section of John 3:16 where it says 'will not perish but have eternal life.' People perish. There is an eternal destination awaiting each one of us—either eternal destruction or eternal life. Jonathan Edwards in his book titled *Charity and Its Fruits* is a compilation of his sermons on I Corinthians 13 and the last chapter of that book is my favorite. The last chapter in that book is titled 'Heaven—a world of love.' It is a world of God's love that lasts forever but he also has a section in there that he calls 'Hell—a world of hatred.' Hell is a place where there is no love, no care for one another, no partying—it's a world of hatred. J. C. Ryle makes this sobering comment about the perishing of people. Ryle says 'There will be a day to come when those who have not been born again will wish that they had never been born at all.' It will be a day of perishing.

Some of you know that I love the book *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is one of my favorite books and if you haven't read it, you should read it. I'm going to give you a spoiler warning for I'm going to tell you the end of the book and that's a dangerous thing to do but one of the funniest characters in this book and the most tragic is the character Ignorance. You meet Ignorance early in the book and his problem is that he is ignorant of salvation. He thinks he is good enough. He thinks if there is a God that God will accept him because he is good enough. He didn't need to come in through the Way.

Christian and Hopeful, the main characters are talking with Ignorance, then they leave him for a while. They see a lot of things and one of the things they see is a huge mountain with a door in the side of it. They don't know what that means but whenever that door was open one could hear screaming, yelling and wailing. As they go through their journey as pilgrims and come to the River of Death where they die, it's a tough time for Christian for he has a difficult time getting over the River. But they make it over to the door, the gate and when they told the King Christian and Hopeful were at the gate the King rushed down and said 'Enter into My glory' and two Shining Ones rushed down to usher them into heaven. The door closes and it's a beautiful picture. You would think that is the end of the book as Christian reaches the Celestial City. Christian left the City of Destruction, as we have talked about in John 3 and he reaches the Celestial City and you would think it's the end. Then you turn the page and you hear about Ignorance. You find Ignorance in a little boat paddling easily, representing death, over to the other side.

This is how the book ends. Ignorance walks up to the door, the gate and it reads 'when they told the King that Ignorance was out there, He would not come down to see Ignorance but instead commanded the two Shining ones, who had conducted Christian and Hopeful into the City, to bind Ignorance hand and foot and take him away. Then they picked up Ignorance carried him through the air to the door that I had seen in the side of the hill earlier. They opened it up and threw him in. Then I saw that there was a way to hell even from the very gates of heaven as well as from the City of Destruction. So I awoke and it was a dream.' That's the end of the book.

What Bunyan wrote, using the similitude of a dream, is in fact reality. There are many, many people like Ignorance who just think that they're good enough and that God will accept them in the end because they live a good life. That's not true for His Word says it's for whoever believes in Him but isn't that a great Word? Whoever believes in Him has eternal life—what a great Word for no one has to perish. Whosoever believes—anyone will enter into the Celestial City, the gates of heaven.

Years ago we took a group of high school students to work right outside of London in a working class area with my good friend Colin Philips, who was a Baptist pastor there. He labored faithfully for 25 years. We had a Bible club during the week we were there and many kids came. Three of the kids in the neighbor I really got to know. They wreaked havoc in that community and in Colin's church. One of them threw a brick at him while he was preaching in the pulpit. Every Sunday these kids would climb up the bars on the windows of his church and shake, yell, cuss and these kids were around 10 years old. Their names were Daren, Leon and Raymond. These kids loved McDonalds.

I told these three if they came every day to the Bible club that I would bring them a sack of McDonalds at the end of the week. Daren would have none of it and said 'I love McDonalds but I'm not coming and don't want to have anything to do with it.' He never came and he missed out. Leon was a kid a really got to know and he was great. He believed me and came every day. He said 'Mr. Benny I can't wait till Friday.' He ended up eating about two or three McDonald's hamburgers. I had a sack full of them in a brown paper sack. Raymond was the interesting one. Raymond kept doubting. He would come back each day but even on the last day he couldn't come to grips with whether I would have those hamburgers or not. I pointed through a window to a brown sack where I said to him 'At the end of the day you will get the hamburgers and they are in the brown sack over there.' He said 'I don't believe there are burgers in that sack. I said 'I'm telling you Raymond that as sure as there is a God in heaven who loves

you dearly there are ten hamburgers in that brown sack over there.’ He doubted and kept going back and forth on whether he would come back. He said to me ‘If you’re lying I’ll kill you.’ He was only 10 years old but I believed him when he said that. I said ‘I’m not lying.’ He came back, finally ate those hamburgers and he loved it. It was a great day.

I felt like Raymond was like doubting Thomas. I wanted to say ‘put your hand in that bag’ just like Jesus said to Thomas in John 20:27, [27] “*Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.*” Jesus basically said ‘Stop doubting and believe.’ That’s the power of His love that He fills our hearts with love and gives us peace and it’s all with the exercise of one little word—believe. It is whoever believes.

In conclusion, I love the song “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us.” The words remind me of the outline of this passage and I almost used it as my outline. The words to the song are;

How deep the Father's love for us (that is for God so loved..)
How vast beyond all measure (that’s the breadth of God’s love)
That He should give His only Son (as the verse says, that He gave His only Son)
To make a wretch His treasure (whoever believes in Him should not perish)

People perish because they are wretches but Jesus loves to wash wretches and adopt us into His family. He loves to change foes into friends and traitors into treasures. That is His love for us. Why don’t people believe this? It says in Isaiah 53:1 about Jesus, [1] *Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?* (NASB) Why don’t people believe the message of God’s love? It’s not as the atheist Sam Harris and many other atheists have said, ‘because there is not enough evidence.’ That is not why people don’t believe.

The reason people don’t believe is they love their sins too much and are not willing to part with them. They are not willing to surrender to Jesus as Savior and Lord. They want the right to reign and rule their own lives and not renounce that. They reject the ‘whosoever believes’ and continue to believe in themselves. They love the world and it’s hard to part with the world. Their version of this statement would not be what we just read but their version would be something like this; ‘for men so loved the world that they gave up on God’s Son believing that they would not perish but still have eternal life.’ It’s the pride of man. It’s tough to part with this world.

Those who are lost stumble over Christ. Romans 9:32b–33a says [32b] *They stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33a] just as it is written, “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE...”* (NASB) They stumble over it all the time but Romans 9:33b goes on to say [33b] *AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.*” (NASB) Repent and believe today. If you are not a Christian don’t believe the father of lies (Satan) any longer who tries to keep you from this incredible truth. Come to Him today and watch Him love you and change you more than you could ever imagine. Trust Him, believe and live forever.

It simply requires believing. We say repentance and faith but that is because they are two sides of the same coin. In believing we’re turning to Christ. You can’t turn to Christ without turning from your sins and all efforts to save yourself by your good works—that’s repentance and faith. You turn to Christ. I would challenge you and encourage you if you don’t know Jesus, today stop doubting and believe. Let us pray.

Prayer:

If you have never come to Christ I invite you today to say 'Lord Jesus, I need You, I recognize that I have not trusted you, I have not followed You and I have turned away from You but I am turning to You now. Forgive me of my sins, come into my life and make me the person you would have me to be.' Father, for those who know You, let us once again be amazed by Your Divine love and let us be strengthened by it. Father, let us go tell someone this week that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life, Amen.

Power Point:

I. The Depth of God's Love

For God so loved

II. The Breadth of God's Love

the world

III. The Proof of God's Love

that He gave His only Son

IV. The Power of God's Love

that whoever believes in Him, should not perish but have eternal life.