

John 3:16
The greatest sentence ever written!

Preliminaries: This morning we are going back to our sermon series in the gospel of John!

Prayer for illumination: Please join me in prayer...

Sermon introduction:

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, said his favorite Bible verse was **Zechariah 3:2:** "Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"

John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, said that his favorite Bible verse was **Romans 5:20:** "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century reformer, said that his favorite Bible verse was Romans 1:17: "The righteous will live by faith." (Boice, John, 226)

What is your favorite Bible verse?

For many, the answer is John 3:16.

John 3:16 (ESV) — 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."

This verse has been called-

"The greatest verse in the Bible!"

"The world's greatest text."

"The most wonderful sentence that was ever written." (R. A. Torrey)

Many non-Christians can recite it. I had a non-Christian friend in high school named Eric. He sacrilegiously signed his yearbook "Eric 3:16."

Unfortunately, our familiarity with this verse, often blinds us to its utterly astonishing truths.

Why is this particular verse so well loved? Because it beautifully summarizes God's amazing love for sinners.

In this verse we learn at least four things about love...

The author of love

The object of love

The measure of love

The result of love

First, the author of love!

Who is the author of Love? God the father!

Look with me at the first few words of John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world...”

These verses highlight the love of God the father. We know this is a reference to God the father, because later in this verse we learn that this member of the Godhead sent his only son.

Let me ask you a question...

Do you believe that God the father loves you? Some think that God the father is the angry member of the trinity while God the son is the loving member of the trinity. After all, it was the son who died on the cross to assuage the father's righteous wrath, which is mentioned over 500 times in the Bible.

Sometimes we think that God the Father is always looking for an excuse to make our lives miserable. Surely, he does not want us to enjoy a glass of wine, watch a ball game, tell a joke, enjoy a strip of bacon, or go fishing.

Illustration:

When I was a sophomore...
Coach Norton made me run lines at Comstock...
My coach seemed to find pleasure in making me suffer...
This is how we often think of God the father...
He is just out to get us...

Yes, God the father is a God of justice, righteousness, and wrath, but he is more loving than any of us could ever comprehend.

How loving?

Twice John tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16)

1 John 4:8 (ESV) — 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

John does not say, “God is loving,” although he is. He says God is love. Which implies that love is rooted in his very nature. He can't not love. Love is who he is. There is no being, inside or outside the universe, as loving as God.

Love permeates all his other attributes.

His holiness is loving holiness.
His wisdom is loving wisdom.
His justice is loving justice.
His patience is loving patience.
His omnipresence is loving omnipresence.

Since God is love, there is absolutely zero malice in his being.

Furthermore, God's love is as infinite as his being.

One scholar writes,

“A fish could sooner drink the Mississippi river dry than we could empty the fountain of his love.”
(Beeke, 792)

The infinite love of God the father is directed at you, yes you!!!!

God the father is the author of love!

But who does he love? This brings us to the next point...

First, the author of love!

Second, the object of love!

Who is the object of the father’s love? The World!

“For God so loved the world...”

This phrase would have shocked the original audience. Why? First century Jews believed that God loved them, and only them. But in this verse, John is proclaiming that God loves all types of people, not just the Jews. In other words, he loves people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

But more importantly, in John’s writings, the word “world” describes all those opposed to God (1:10; 7:7; 14:17; 15:18, 19). This means that the wonder of God’s love is displayed in the unworthiness of its object.

D. A. Carson writes,

“God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad: that is the customary connotation of kosmos (‘world’; cf. notes on 1:9). The world is so wicked that John elsewhere forbids Christians to love it or anything in it (1 Jn. 2:15-17).”

God’s love is mind-blowing, because of whom he loves! God loves unlovely people.

Illustration:

One of the greatest love stories in the Bible is the story of Hosea and Gomer. This story took place several hundred years before Christ. God told Hosea to take Gomer as his wife. Then God said, “Hosea, let me warn you, Gomer will be unfaithful to you, but I want you to keep loving her no matter what, to illustrate my love for my unfaithful people.”

Hosea played the part of God and Gomer played the part of God’s unfaithful people.

Not long after Hosea married the beautiful Gomer, she started committing adultery and she would not stop. Because of all the adultery, her life fell apart. Her life unraveled so completely that she had to sell herself into slavery. God told Hosea to buy her back as a demonstration of God’s love for his people.

One commentator writes,

“Slaves were always sold naked in the ancient world, and that would have been true of Gomer as she was put up on the auction block in the capital city. She had apparently been a beautiful woman. She was still beautiful even in her fallen state. So, when the bidding started the offers were high, as the men of the city bid for the body of the female slave.

“Twelve pieces of silver,” said one.

“Thirteen,” said Hosea.

“Fourteen.” Said another.

“Fifteen,” said Hosea.

The low bidders drop out. But someone added, “Fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley.”

“Fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel and a half of barley,” Said Hosea.

The auctioneer must have looked around for a higher bid and seeing none said, “Sold to Hosea for fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel and a half of barely.”

Now Hosea had his wife back.” (Boice, 328-329 of FCT)

In the ANE Hosea could have killed her, chastised her, or publicly embarrassed her for her unfaithfulness. Instead, he pays for her freedom, clothes her, loves her, and takes her home.

Hosea loved a bad person.

God loves bad people!!! This is what makes his love so amazing.

Application:

God loves the world (i.e., bad people).

This describes all of us before conversion.

Romans 5:6–10 (ESV) — **6** For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **9** Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. **10** For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

See also Eph. 2:1-5.

God does not love us because we are lovely, he loves us to make us lovely.

God did not love us because we cleaned up our lives. He loved us when we were a moral and spiritual mess.

Which means that God will not stop loving us when we continue to make a mess of our lives. God loves the unlovely. God loves the world!!!

And because God loves us so much, he will discipline us when we continue to sin.

Maybe you think, you are too broken, damaged, or guilty to be loved by God. No one is too damaged!!!
No one...

I get it, God loves the evil world. But...

How do we measure God's love? This brings us to the next point.

The author of love.

The object of love.

Third, the measure of love.

What is the measure of love? Sacrifice!

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,”

God the father gave us his only son for a very specific purpose. He gave us his only son to be sacrificed on the cross.

This is clearly the implication of the immediate context.

John 3:14–17 (ESV) — **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.

We see a similar connection between God sending his son, love, and the cross in 1 John.

1 John 4:9–10 (ESV) — **9** 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. **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.

Nearly every time the NT speaks of God the father's love, it is almost always in the context of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Why? The cross is the measure of God's love.

Illustration:

Someone may say they love you, but do they really love you? How would you know?

Love is usually measured by sacrifice....

If a husband gives his wife some roses, it shows some level of sacrifice...

If a husband agrees to watch the kids all weekend, it shows even more sacrifice...

If a husband agrees to take his wife to Hawaii for two weeks... even more sacrifice...

If a husband agrees to take his wife to Hawaii for two weeks. While they are on their hotel balcony, overlooking the ocean, he gives his wife diamond earrings, and a diamond neckless... this shows even more sacrifice....

Furthermore, in doing these things for his wife, it meant that he could not afford to buy those new golf clubs, that new rifle, or that new pickup truck....

This husband made significant sacrifices, which means that he really loves his wife!!!

Application:

The essence of love is sacrifice...

We know God love us because he sacrificed his own son on our behalf.

When do you doubt God's love???

Maybe when you are experiencing...

Health problems
Parenting problems
Emotional problems
Financial problems
Work problems
Marriage problems...

Etc...

In times of trial, crisis, loneliness, and pain, we must remember that God loved us so much that he sent his only son to be sacrificed on the cross in our place.

As a result of this sacrifice, all our sins can be forgiven, and we can be adopted into God's family.

We must possess an absolute confidence that God loves us!!! Do you possess this confidence??? If we don't have this confidence, we must look to the cross again, and again, and again and contemplate the sacrifice made on our behalf. He had our names in mind!!!

The cross is irrefutable proof that God loves us, despite what is happening in our lives.

Charnock wrote,

“The wounds of an almighty God for us are a greater testimony of goodness, than if we had all other riches of heaven and earth.” (Charnock, in Beeke, 801, Vol. 1)

How does one respond to this loving sacrifice? This brings us to the next point...

The author of love
The object of love
The measure of love

Fourth, the response of love!

How do we respond to God's loving sacrificial gift? With belief!

John 3:16 (ESV) — 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.

The last part of this verse is shocking. Why? The most valuable things in this world are often earned.

We have to earn good grades.

We have to earn that spot on the team.
We have to earn our salaries.
We have to earn the respect of our peers.
We have to “earn” health through exercise and diet.

Yet, according to John 3:16, God the father gives us the most valuable thing in the world, Jesus Christ, free of charge, to those who believe.

Since the father gives his son to us free of charge, we know that he loves us.

But we have to believe to receive.

What does it mean to believe?

We need to back up a little bit in our story...

John 3:14–16 (ESV) — 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.

As a mentioned a few weeks ago, this is a reference to Numbers 21. In Numbers 21 the Israelites would not stop complaining against God. They kept complaining, and complaining, and complaining, for years. Finally, God was so fed up that he sent poisonous snakes to punish his people. Many died.

But then he had mercy, he told Moses to craft a bronze snake. Anyone who looked at the snake, with the eyes of faith will be saved. That’s it... they had to merely look.

Illustration:

On January 6, 1850, a snowstorm almost crippled the city of Colchester, England; and a teenage boy was unable to get to the church he usually attended. So, he made his way to a nearby Primitive Methodist chapel, where an ill-prepared layman was substituting for the absent preacher...

For months he had been struggling with assurance of salvation, wondering if he was really a Christian.

The young man described his church experience with these words,

“At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker or tailor or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach... When he’d managed to preach ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery and I dare say with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me as if he knew all my heart he said, ‘Young man, you look very miserable!’

Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to having remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance! However, it was a good blow struck right home.... And then lifting up his hands and shouting as only a primitive Methodist could do, he said, ‘Young man, look to Jesus Christ! Look! Look! Look! You’ve nothing to do but look and live!’...

There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the Son and I could have risen that instant and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ and the simple faith which looks alone to Him.”

This young convert was Charles Spurgeon, he went on to be known as the prince of preachers.

Application:

Spurgeon looked to Jesus Christ with the eyes of faith, and he was saved.

All we must do is look to Jesus Christ. This is what it means to believe.

Yet, the look of faith is not a mere intellectual assent to truths. The look of faith is a wholehearted trust in Jesus. And it is always accompanied by an earnest desire to turn away from sins and follow Jesus.

How will you respond to God’s loving gift?

There are only two responses, two options, and two types of people...

John 3:16 (ESV) — 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.

One response leads to perishing...

In other words, all those who refuse to look to Jesus with the eyes of faith, will perish forever in outer darkness. They will be banished from God’s loving presence.

This will really happen to real people, to nice people, to all of those who don’t look to Jesus.

This will happen to young, old, rich, poor, black, and white, etc...

The other response leads to eternal life...

All those who look to Jesus with the eyes of faith will experience eternal life.

Eternal life begins the moment we believe...

John 17:3 (ESV) — 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Eternal life is relationship with God. This is the good news of the gospel.

Theologian John Piper argues...

The gospel is not first and foremost that I can have my sins forgiven.

The gospel is not first and foremost the fact that I can be justified.

The gospel is not first and foremost the fact that I can be redeemed from Satan, sin, and the fear of death.

Forgiveness, Justification, and redemption are all means that God uses to remove our sin so that we can have relationship with him.

Relationship with him, described as eternal life, is the good news.

God loves us so much that he sacrificed his own son so that we could enjoy him forever.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, consider the words of this poem-

The love of God is greater far
than tongue or pen can ever tell,

It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell.

His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

Could we with ink the oceans fill
And were the skies of parchment made;

Were every stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade,

To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,

Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.¹

¹ Boice, J. M. (2005). [*The Gospel of John: an expositional commentary*](#) (p. 229). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.