

Behold: Who is Jesus?

God so Loved the World

John 3:16-21

Mark Vroegop

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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. 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 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. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 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” (John 3:16–21).

This morning we are starting back into our series on the Gospel of John. We took a six-week break to focus on our “Antioch Vision”—a strategy that involves Reaching our World, Deepening our Discipleship, Developing our Leaders, and Maximizing our Resources. And we’ve spent the last four weeks of those talking about racial harmony. I’m thrilled with what I see God doing in our church and with the lives that are being touched.

I also want you to know that today marks the end of the fiscal year, and I’m pleased to tell you that our giving and attendance are strong. We’ll give you more information in the weeks to come, but I want to share two data points that I think will encourage you:

- Our attendance is up two percent over last year, and we’re averaging over 3,600 people per week
- Giving is also really strong, especially in the last six weeks. We are two percent above last year’s giving.

As we turn the corner toward Easter, I want to remind you that the next three to four weeks are some of the most strategic weeks all year. We need you to invite your friends and neighbors. And Easter Sunday wouldn’t happen without your regular generosity. So, thanks for investing in our church. Please keep joining us in our mission to multiply the gospel.

Familiar Verse

I don’t think it would surprise you to know that of the over 30,000 verses in the Bible, John 3:16 is probably the most well-known. “For God so loved the world . . .” has made its way into the various contours of our culture. Let me give you a few examples:

- If there's going to be a sign at a football or basketball game, it's likely John 3:16
- John 3:16 is printed on the bottom rim of every drink cup at In-and-Out Burger
- You may remember Tim Tebow painting John 3:16 underneath his eyes. After he won the football national championship, 94 million people Googled John 3:16.¹
- If you are into Monster Trucks, you'll know that Devin Jones has John 3:16 painted on his truck, Barbarian
- Keith Urban, a popular country music artist, included the reference in his hit song called, "John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16"²

I could give you many, many more examples. But I think the point is clear and obvious. John 3:16 is one of the most popular verses in the Bible. That presents an opportunity and a challenge.

It's a challenge because you might assume that you know what this text is saying since you are familiar with it. John 3:16 could be so well known to you that you might be tempted to zone out for this message. Let me encourage you not to do that.

But it's also an opportunity. For some of you, I'm going to take something familiar and show you how it has the potential to change your life—forever. You might very well become a Christian in the middle of this sermon. And for those of you who have already put your trust in Christ, more fully understanding this verse could be a way for you to effectively talk to people about your faith. You might start a conversation by helping a person understand what this text is really saying.

This is a familiar verse. But I'm not sure if it's well-known.

You could summarize the message of our text today with six words: "loved and rescued out of condemnation." Let's dive in and see what we can learn and how we can apply this text to our lives.

1. Loved and Rescued

Verses 16-17 capture the central message of the Bible. They identify the way in which God saves people through believing in his son, Jesus Christ, out of his love for them.

Now you'll notice that the first word in verse 16 is "for." This is the first of three times the word is used. Whenever you see that word, it's important to look back to know what is happening in the text.

The last time we were in John, we examined the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus in verses 1-14. I suggested that Nicodemus was not likely a willful seeker. Rather there seems to be a tone of hostility in his approach to Jesus. Therefore, Jesus appears to go after his religious pride—his belief that he could make himself righteous. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to conclude that true religious change was impossible by himself.

¹ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2018/january/tim-tebow-s-shocking-story-about-john-3-16-coincidence-goes-viral>

² <https://www.biblica.com/articles/john-3-16/>

We left the text at verses 14-15—*“And as Moses lifted 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 3:14–15).

Roots of Love

Now, Jesus was intentionally hard on Nicodemus. However, he doesn’t leave him without hope. In verses 14-15, he points Nicodemus to the future day when Jesus would be crucified. He uses an Old Testament metaphor with which Nicodemus would be familiar. But Jesus doesn’t stop there.

He digs deeper to help Nicodemus see the bigger picture. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to see that the cross was merely the intersection of God’s love and our rescue. In other words, two things happen in the crucifixion of Jesus: God demonstrates his love for us, and those who receive Jesus are saved. This is the glorious message of the gospel.

Our rescue is rooted in God’s love.

Underneath our forgiveness is the goodness, the kindness, the mercy, and the love of God. Our loveliness is not the root of redemption. God’s loveliness is the root. The hymn-writer put it this way:

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus!
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free;
rolling as a mighty ocean
in its fullness over me.³*

Jesus aims to help Nicodemus not just wrestle with the impossibility of saving himself, but he also wants him to be overwhelmed with the inexplicable love of God. The Son of Man will be lifted up, and the reason for this gracious sacrifice is the deep, deep love of God.

That’s why verse 16 says “God so loved the world . . .” Now the word “love” is the Greek word *agape*. It is John’s preferred word for the affection between the three members of the Trinity.

“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35).

It is also what characterizes Jesus’s relationship with the disciples.

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

³ https://hymnary.org/text/o_the_deep_deep_love_of_jesus

John 13-17 is the location in the book of John where the word “love” occurs more frequently than anywhere else in the gospel.⁴ Love is a foundational concept in John’s theology of God, the cross, and Christianity as a whole. It’s no wonder Jesus called the disciples to love one another:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

The reason that I’m taking so much time on this is because I think it is good to be reminded that right after Jesus helps Nicodemus to see his helplessness, he immediately talks about the love of God. He seeks to overwhelm Nicodemus with the heart of God that is behind the redemption that he so desperately needs. I think this is helpful for a number of reasons.

First, if you are here and have not yet received Jesus, you need to know that the reason Jesus died was because of God’s love for you. I don’t know what you think about Christianity or what your view of God is like, but I want to start from a standpoint that the Creator of the universe went on a mission to rescue people. And he didn’t do it because he was needy or because he felt bad about how things had turned out in the world. He sent his only Son because God not only overflows with holiness, but he also gushes with divine love. And this divine love is deeper, wider, and more sacrificial than you can imagine. The starting point of the gospel—the news that Jesus died for our sins—is the love of God. Stop and consider this: God loves you!

Second, it is important to fully understand this if you are Christian because it should inform how you talk about the core message of the Bible. It is essential that people understand that God is holy and that we are sinners. But we need to be sure that we tell them about God’s love. As you think about who you will invite to Easter weekend, be sure that the love of God is part of the conversation.

Scope of Love

Look at what the text says! It doesn’t just say that the motivation underneath the cross was the love of God. That takes love deep. But it also says that God loved the world. Do you know what this means?

At one level Jesus is intentionally increasing the scope of God’s affection beyond the people of Israel. That would be important because Nicodemus was a religious leader in Israel. He specialized in the religious traditions of the Jewish people. And while Israel was always meant to be a lighthouse to the Gentile world, Jesus tells this religious ruler that God’s love extends beyond the borders of Israel.

However, at another level, the word “world” refers to more than just people who are not Jewish. It refers to everything connected to the created order. This is the Greek word *kosmos*. God loves the world that he made. He called it very good (Gen. 1:31). And his aim is to win the world back to the purpose for which it was created (Col. 1:18-20). God’s love goes as far as the brokenness of sin in the world. He set

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 204.

his love on the entire created order by directing his affection specifically to those who bear his image—men and women. The scope of God’s love is stunning.

Gift of Love

God’s love was more than an emotion or affection. It was expressed through action—“that he gave his only Son.” The giving proceeds out of the depth of his love. This sacrificial act on the part of God becomes the basis of how we understand what Christianity is all about. Jesus enters the mess of humanity out of love. He lives as a man out of love. Jesus teaches out of love. And when he is lifted up on the cross, he does it out of love.

God’s love for the world is directly connected to the sending of Jesus. God rescues people through his love.

The effect of this is a sweeping promise—“that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Here we find one of the most glorious promises in all the Bible! God’s love and rescuing know no boundaries. Whoever believes in him can be rescued.

Verse 17 simply reiterates this from the angle of condemnation. John anticipates someone saying, “God sent Jesus into the world to judge us.” While it is true that Jesus made the holiness of God clear and that he warned people about their eternal destinies, his mission was not to bring retribution but redemption.

We’ll talk more about this in a moment. But John wants to make clear that the entrance of Jesus into the world was for the purpose of rescuing people. The sending of Jesus was not God’s anger with a wayward world; Jesus came to the world out of God’s sovereign love in order to rescue people.

God saves them. He rescues sinful people from the brokenness in and around them. He saves them from the frightening consequence of rebellion—eternal punishment in Hell.

If you have not yet put your trust in Christ, this text is one of the clearest invitations in the Bible. God not only knows who you are, what you are like, what you’ve done, and what you’ve not done. But he loves you. And the greatest demonstration of that love is the fact that he sent Jesus to rescue you from yourself.

You may think Christianity is a religion of judgmental people. I’m sorry if you’ve encountered people who have misapplied its message. While there is a standard for righteousness and obedience, the essence of Christianity is the way that God loved the world and sought to rescue us.

An all-knowing, all-powerful, and righteous God made the greatest sacrifice you could possibly imagine by sending his Son to die for the sins of wayward people. You need not wonder why. The Bible is clear—“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Do you know how significant and meaningful it is that God knows and loves you? It is not only the heart of Christianity, but it is also one of the deepest needs of the human heart. Here’s what Tim Keller says:

To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.⁵

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. He loved and rescued us. But that's not all. Remember the main point of this text is "loved and rescued from condemnation."

2. From Condemnation

I've spent the bulk of our time in verses 16-17 because I want you to fully understand and feel the power of what John records Jesus saying here. God's love is the starting point for Christianity. But there's a reason why it's so incredible.

God's love and rescue are amazing because of what God saves us from.

Verse 18 helps us understand that Jesus doesn't bring or create condemnation. It's already happened. John writes that a failure to believe in Jesus merely reveals or uncovers the condemnation which is already true. In other words, the world is already broken and in need of redemption.

Verses 19-20 add further clarity. Jesus clearly identifies the nature of the judgment. What does the fallen, condemned condition of mankind look like?

"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. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (John 3:19–20).

Notice the three characteristics of our broken world:

- We love darkness rather than the light because our works are evil
- We don't come to the light
- We hide our brokenness and our sinfulness

Just think how true that is both in you and around you. Think back to the things in your life that you regret. Consider the things that are embarrassing. My guess is that those things were not only wrong, but they also created hiding and shame.

If you were to read about the first sin in the Garden of Eden, you'd find the same story. Rebellion against God lives in the darkness, it resists coming to the light, and we hide. And Jesus's point here is very important.

Jesus comes into a world already broken. He enters our humanity—which is already a terrible mess. The sending of Jesus does create condemnation. That's already true! Sin caused devastating consequences. Everywhere we look, there are obvious expressions of the brokenness of our culture. The world is not

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/532976-to-be-loved-but-not-known-is-comforting-but-superficial>

getting better. Why? Because the created order is marking time until the final day of reckoning. And every time sin surfaces in our world, we see the problem. Our world has already received its sentence—“For the wages of sin is death . . .” (Rom. 6:23). Every funeral, every cancer diagnosis, every addiction, every failed marriage, every wayward child, every act of immorality tells us that our world is terribly broken.

Jesus doesn't come to bring judgment. He comes to bring hope. He enters our world in order to bring God's grace. That's what verse 21 is all about! The person who puts his or her faith in Christ comes to light. Why?

Because they are thrilled about God's work in their life—"his works have been carried out in God!" Oh, here is the great contrast and the hope of Christianity. Rather than hiding, pretending, living in shame and under condemnation, Jesus calls us to find our identity and our meaning in him. Christians are people who embrace their contribution to the brokenness—"I'm a sinner." And they are able to do that because they know what a Savior Jesus is.

Applications

I've tried to make this message applicable throughout our time in John 3. But let me make a few points very clear. This text is too important for us to miss a few key thoughts.

First, to those of you who are believers in Jesus, if you have turned from your sins and put your trust in Jesus, this message should create wonder and worship as you consider the greatness of God's love for you. I mean that you understood it in part when you came to faith in Christ. But now?! The more you know about the brokenness of the world, your own heart, and the depth of your need, you ought to find your heart beating with a new passion. And that should then lead you to live out your Christianity by loving others. Love is both the root and the fruit of the gospel.

Second, to those of you who are yet to fully put your trust in Jesus, I appeal to you yet again. Look around you. Look in you. Look at your past. Think about your future. Don't you see the brokenness? Don't you feel the gaping hole in our culture, in your relationships, and in your soul? Something's terribly wrong. The Bible tells us that sin—in us and around us—caused this terrible problem. And yet God loves the world. He loves you. That's why Jesus came.

God sent him on a mission to rescue you from yourself. Jesus hung on the cross. He was broken so that you could be rescued from brokenness. He became sin for you. He loved and rescued you from condemnation, but you must believe.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

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