

March 13, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

For God So Loved the World

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Some have said that John 3:16 is the greatest text in the Bible. There are so many great texts that I am not at all sure it stands as **the** greatest, but it certainly is right up there among the front runners. It is though, probably the most quoted text in Scripture, second only to '*Judge not that you be not judged*', which, by the way, no one who quotes that text can usually give you the address like they can John 3:16. They just know it's in the Bible somewhere. But John 3:16 is the ubiquitous text – it shows up everywhere. The American public has seen it at the NBA finals, the MLB All-Star game, the Indy 500, even at the Augusta National Golf Club, but most notably at football games. **Usually the guy holding the sign is this one** – perhaps you've seen him. Luther called it the miniature gospel and the text in which is contained the whole Bible. Spurgeon preached on this text at least once a year. And it is so familiar to us that we run the risk of misconstruing its content, or overgeneralizing its application or at the very least marginalizing its meaning.

So this morning, I want to spend some time here to really understand what the Bible is teaching us through this text, so that the next time you quote it, you will have a deeper understanding of just what God is telling us. *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.* John 3:16 First of all we need to understand that this comes in the context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus on what qualifies someone for the kingdom of God. Context is crucial. D.A. Carson has said that a text out of context is a pretext for a prooftext. Jesus is talking about salvation here, to a very religious Jew who expected the salvation of Israel. The Jews were not looking for the salvation of the world – they were looking for the salvation of Israel only. And the good Jews were doing all the right things to get themselves approved by God and Jesus comes along and basically says, 'You're going about this the wrong way. It isn't about what you are doing, it is about what is done to you – you must be born again'.

Jesus told Nicodemus, 'Remember the story of Moses and the people of Israel and the fiery serpents? That story is a picture of what has to happen for you to have eternal life. I have to be crucified and die for your sins so that when you look to Me, believe in Me, you'll have eternal life'. And then He says, '**For** – God so loved the world'. In other words, Jesus is explaining they why behind the story. The why behind God's provision for dying men – **For God so loved the world**.

And I want you to notice just that first phrase. Everything turns on that first phrase. All that follows is based on God loving the world. So to understand it we need to answer the question: **In what way did God love the world that moved Him to send His only begotten Son to save it?** That is, what is the quality of God's love for the world? How does He love the world? And I think to understand this we need to look at what the Bible means when it talks about the love of God. This is so important that we cannot afford to let our assumptions about love determine the meaning here. We need to let the Bible define what it means by the love of God in any given passage. To do otherwise is to do violence to Scripture and we want to be faithful to this Word. May God grant us eyes to see, minds to understand, and hearts to embrace His word.

The Bible speaks of the love of God in several different ways. **It speaks to us of a relational love in the Godhead, a trinitarian love, if you will** – that is, the kind of love the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father. The love of God that flows between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As in John 5:20: '*For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing...*' John 5:20 Or in John 14 where Jesus declares: *but so that the world may know that I love the Father...*' John 14:31 This is not a redemptive love – there is no sense in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit need to be redeemed. It is a love that is in some sense based on the inherent worth of the object of love. That is the Father is intrinsically loveable to the Son and vice versa. Who the Father is, who the Son is, who the Holy Spirit is, is eminently loveable. This quite different from the love He has for me which is not based on any intrinsic loveliness in myself. I am not loveable – there is nothing in me that should spark God's affection for me.

Then there is what we might call providential love. That is a kind of love that is what we call a common grace. A love that God has that is generous and without distinction as to whether the object of His love is righteous or unrighteous. A love that keeps everything going in the world, causes life and breath and motion for all people. The Bible speaks of this love in Matthew as the kind of love that gives the sun and rain for the benefit of all, and this statement is made in the context of telling us how to love our enemies – and it says to love them the same way in which God does *'...for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.'* Matthew 5:45

And then the Bible speaks of a yearning love, an inviting love or salvific love. That is, the love that God has to call rebels to salvation – a pleading love that says *'Come to Me and be saved.'* This is the love that stands at the door and knocks and says, *'For whosoever will.'* This is the love of God that goes out into the world calling on men to repent and turn from sin and be saved.

Which is different than the **fourth kind of love which is a conditional love,** a covenant love. That is a love in which there are certain conditions to fill. As in Exodus where He says: *I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.* Exodus 20:5-6 or in Jude 21 where the writer says: *keep yourselves in the love of God.* Inferring that there are conditions to be met that assume the possibility of not keeping ourselves in the love of God. Or in John 15 where Jesus says: *'Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love ; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.'* John 15:9-10

And then finally the Bible talks about God's elective love, which is a choosing love. That is the love that says, *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.'* It is a love that chooses quite apart from any intrinsic value of its object. When God speaks of His love for His people Israel He says: *'I have loved you with an everlasting love ; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.* Jeremiah 31:3 Why did God love Israel and not Assyria in this way? Was it because Israel was somehow smarter, better looking, had more ability than other nations? Not at all. The Bible makes it clear that God did not in love choose Israel for any intrinsic worth in Israel. **He loved them because He loved them.** In Deuteronomy, and over and over in the Bible, God points this out. *The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples* Deuteronomy 7:7

His elective love simply means that He loved them because He loved them. Its like when your wife asks you, 'Honey, do you love me?' And you answer, 'Yes, I love you'. And then she says 'Why?' Husbands, let me give you a little advice here. Don't say, 'I love you because...' Answer this one Biblically – 'I love you because I love you'. If you give her any reasons, then her acceptance is determined by those reasons – her self-esteem and self-worth are all measured by the reasons why you love her. And if any of those reasons stop working, so does her self-worth. God's electing love chooses us not on the basis of who we are but on who He is and what He wants. If He chose us any other way, we would be forever trying to earn His love. His elective love is unearned – it just is.

This is the love that raises us from spiritual death and gives us life – not because we somehow deserve it or earn it or merit such love, but because God sovereignly chose to give us life. This is Ephesians 2 love: *But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),* Ephesians 2:4-5 Jesus told Nicodemus: *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* John 3:8

In other words, being born again happens to us because God wills. We don't control the wind, and we don't control the Spirit. He comes and goes with His regenerating power as He pleases. This is electing love. A love that goes far beyond offering life to spiritually dead people if they will believe. This love **conquers** our deadness. It gives new life, and brings us to faith, and unites us to Christ—all in one sovereign instant. This is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 1 where he says: *In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.* Ephesians 1:5-6

What you should not take away from this is that there are different loves of God. In other words, God does not look on us and say, 'How shall I love Michael today? I think I'll choose Love #4'. Please don't go away today saying, 'Pastor Mike said that there are five kinds of God's love'. That is not what I have said. What I did say was that the Bible talks about God's love in different ways – one love, different ways of speaking about it. Just like we do. I might say, 'I love my wife and I love lemon merangue pie'. But I will be in serious trouble if I put those two together in a sentence in my wife's hearing. I love them both but I love them in different ways. So it is important to realize that **these are not distinctively different loves of God** but that **they are distinctives ways of talking about the love of God**.

What we should never do as well is take any one of these ways of talking about the love of God and make it absolute and call it normative. That is if you take any one of these ways and somehow universalize it and say that this is the way to understand the love of God quite apart from any of the others, you will cause a theological train wreck. **If you take the fact that the Bible speaks of God's love as conditional and universalize it, then you will be continually wondering if you have done enough today for God to love you.** Have I worked hard enough at resisting temptation? Were my devotions long enough and passionate enough? Have I loved my neighbor as well as I might have? Eventually, your theology is so bent that you are working your way to heaven and grace becomes an enemy of your effort. **If you universalize conditional love you makes works the basis for salvation**

Or suppose you say that God's love is entirely providential – a love that God has that is generous and without distinction as to whether the object of His love is righteous or unrighteous. God's love then is extended to all people everywhere, independent of any moral virtue, independent of whether or not they have come to Christ, independent of righteousness or unrighteousness. We are all God's children and God loves Billy Graham and Osama Bin Laden all the same, and everything is good because He is such a sweet loving God. And pretty soon you have a theology that has no room for God's holiness and justice, and if there is no room for holiness and justice, then there is eventually no room for the cross. And it is not long before you are rejecting the God of the Bible who visits wrath on the unrighteous and the wicked, because a loving God would never do that.

Rob Bell, a very popular pastor and teacher in Christian circles today, just came out with a new book: *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. And in the preface he says this: ***A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better.... This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.*** In other words, the way he has universalized the love of God, the way he interprets Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy means that God would never conceive of such a thing as hell, much less allow anyone to suffer eternal punishment, and so no one is lost, all are saved. **If you universalize providential love you end up with universal salvation**

Or suppose you universalize God's love as an inviting love or salvific love, and then you picture God as having done His best to make the way for salvation and now there is nothing He can do – it all depends on you. There He stands, pleading for sinners to come to the cross – He sent His Son, He's poured out the Holy Spirit and He invites you to come and now it all depends on you – there's nothing more He can do, you hold the key to eternity in your own hands. And our theology becomes self-centered and warped and we wring our hands at the fate of billions as we make emotional appeals for workers in the field. **If you universalize inviting love then everything depends on you**

Or suppose you take the other view that God's love is entirely elective – He chooses, we don't – everything is in His hands – whether I'm saved or damned is up to Him – not a blessed thing I can do about it. Then there is no point in pushing evangelism – either God will save people or He won't. And our theology does violence to the clear teaching of Scripture that we **must** choose, and gives rise to a complacency and apathy for missions. At a ministers' meeting in 1786, William Carey raised the question of whether it was the duty of all Christians to spread the Gospel throughout the world, and one older, wiser elder, is said to have responded: ***"Young man, sit down; when God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid and mine."*** **If you universalize elective love then nothing we do matters.** We just sit back and let God bring to faith those whom He will bring to faith and the fate of our neighbor then does not weigh so heavily upon us, and we have no motive for mission or indeed any desire to pray for God to send workers into the field. We're going to heaven – too bad about everyone else.

So what do we see here in John 3:16? I think we see the love of God expressed in all its fullness. His love for the world, that is His love for the totality of fallen, sinful human beings is not only providential, giving life and breath and being to every man, but it is yearning, longing, calling out to whosoever will to believe and be saved. We see the kind of love that is shared among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the basis for the Father giving His Son to die for this world. In His prayer recorded in John 17, before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed: *'...and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.'* John 17:26 John 3:16 is grounded in the love that is shared between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact the invitation of the gospel is to participate in this divine love fest. It is also conditional – belief is the condition – *whoever believes in Him shall not perish*. And it is elective – you cannot divorce this text from the context in which Jesus tells Nicodemus that new birth happens by the will of the Spirit breathing new life into those whom He will. And so we see our believing in Him working with His choosing us to grant us eternal life.

But the emphasis here is on God's yearning love – His longing as Peter tells us, for none to perish but for all to come to repentance. Come to the cross and you will be saved. Receive the message of the gospel and your sins will be forgiven, God's wrath will be removed, you will have eternal joy with him. And the emphasis contains a condition: If you believe. The gift of life eternal is free – but you must believe. Forgiveness of sins is guaranteed – but you must believe. The wrath of God is removed – but you must believe. Eternal joy is yours – but you must believe. John 3:16 goes out to all people of every ethnic and language group, and every age and every socio-economic category and, best of all, to every degree of sinner—from the bad to the worst. *"God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*

The love of God is the great foundation not only of our calling and election, but the energizing motive for missions. As verse 17 says: *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* John 3:17 **The first time Christ came to our world was for salvation – the next time He comes will be for judgment.** The Bible makes it clear that the invitation of God for sinners to come to Calvary and repent goes out to all the world, all the Jews, all the Gentiles. But it is equally clear that not all will respond and come. The fault is not on God's side – it is on ours.

This is why we preach the gospel – the love of God constrains us to preach the good news to every person regardless of race, color, creed, social status, gender or age. And so we can say to everyone – **'God loves you. And this is how He loves you: He gave His only begotten Son to die, so that if you would just believe, your sins would be forgiven and you would have eternal life and enjoy the love of God for eternity.'** That is what John 3:16 says, and that is why it is the best-known verse in the Bible even among the unbelieving world. For in it the love of God is manifested for all to see and savor and believe in a rejoice over. This is why we can preach with confidence – God **will** save whoever will believe. We should be the boldest, most radical preachers of the good news because of the incredible promise of God rooted in His amazing love: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.* John 3:16

Our gracious Father God,

Here is love – that You gave Your only begotten Son for rebels like us, that we might not perish but have eternal life. Our hearts are stunned by the wonder of Your love for us in Christ. All our sins on Him were laid – He surrendered to hell's worst that we might attain heaven's best – He was stripped that we might be clothed – He was wounded that we might be healed – He suffered that we might be comforted – He endured the shame that we might inherit glory and entered darkness that we might have eternal light. O Father, You who spared not Your own Son that You might spare us, grant that we would love You with our lips and our lives, that our every breath would be thankfulness and praise, glory and honor to You. May the great love with which You loved us engage our hearts and souls and bodies to proclaim this love of heaven in all this earth. May we be a people who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.