

John 3:16-21 For God So Loved the World

There is a reason why John 3:16 is quoted more than any other verse in the Bible. This verse REALLY does sum up the mission of God to save sinners! So, today will be a reminder and a help to us as consider the great love of God in sending the Son. I want to answer three questions: 1) What does it mean that God loves the world, 2) What does God do because he loves the world, and 3) Who are the recipients of God's love.

1. What does it mean that God loves the world? In a general way, let's think for a moment about the "ways" in which God loves. i. God loves his own glory (Is. 42:8; 48:11; etc.) ii. God loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20;). iii. God loves his creation; He looks down and says, "it is good." iv. God loves his people in a special way (Eph. 1:4; John 13:1; so many verses). And here in our text, John says he loves the "world." I am amazed at how many ways the Bible describes the love of God (See D.A. Carson "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God). The non-Christian world only thinks of love in the ways we as humans love (whatever that is). And because of this, they only see the love of God from their own self-imposed ways. I liken this to only looking at our sun, only to miss the billions of stars in the universe. As Christians, it is very important for us to distinguish the ways in which God loves.

With this in mind, what does it mean that God loves the world? I want to mention three truths from the way John uses the word "world." i. God's love is not restricted to race. For the most part the Jewish people knew that God loved them, but they had a hard time believing God also loved the Gentiles. And now, particularly in Christ, we see the love of God going out to the entire world. ii. Calvin says in his commentary that God loves the human race and does not want it to perish. But, the most important truth I want us to see here in these verses is: iii. God's love comes down to an evil world. The context is clear when we read v. 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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already . . .**" In v. 19 he speaks of "judgment." "**And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness.**" And in v. 20: "**For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.**" These verses speak of sin and evil and condemnation and judgment. John uses the word "world" 58 times in John and 17 times in 1 & 2 John. And in the great majority of those cases, he is referring to an evil, sinful, world.

Brothers and sisters, the world is already condemned. Condemned for what? Sin! In Rom. 3:9-11 Paul says the same thing: "**What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."** Since the fall of Adam, sin and death and evil have been the reality and the experience of this world. So, when we think of the love of God we must see TO WHOM this love comes! In John 15:19 Jesus says we are "**chosen out of the world.**"

We must never forget, and this sermon gives us an opportunity this morning to think more deeply about the fact that WE, as sinners are part of this evil world. So, what do we look like in and of ourselves? We suppress the truth. In Rom. 1:18 Paul says **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”** We exchange the glory of God for images and worship them instead of our Creator. In this way we are fools. Rom. 1:22:23 says, **“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and 23 exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man . . .”** Our sinful hearts are idol factories. As Cannon Mills used to produce scores of sheets and towels every day, so our hearts construct idols. In and of ourselves we do not acknowledge God and give him the glory which is his already. In 1:29-32 Paul also says, **“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”** We walk against him. We run against him. We scheme against him. We worship the things he has given us above Him. We love the things of this world more than Him. We think only of ourselves. This is what we see and what we experience in this world.

What do you see? Look around. Look to your own household. Look down into your own heart. I love the words of Paul, when he considers what we were “in this world,” and he considers the love God in sending the Son, he says, **“And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”** And in Rom. 5:8 **“But God commanded his love toward us, in that while were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** For God so loved the world! It is not our loveliness that attracts God to us. But it is his love!

Application: We must get the sinfulness of sin if we are to begin to understand the love of God. And we must know that the love of God that leads to our salvation is undeserved.

Application: Who can understand the love of God? At the end of the day, there is so much mystery. John attributes the sending of the Son into a sinful, evil world to the LOVE of God. In this context as Paul thinks of the Gospel going to the world, he says, **“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”**

Application: John 17:18 We are sent into this same evil world to bear witness. John 15:26-27: **“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”**

Application: Do not become a friend to the world. James 4:4 says: **“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”**

2. What does God do because he loves the world? He gives the Son. The word “For” can be translated *“in this way.”* In other words, THIS is the love of God . . . He gave his Son, his only Son. Now, I must say in this sermon today, I will leave much to be considered, particularly the fact that John says Jesus is the **“only begotten”** Son (The ESV and other translations miss the depths of this word.) This term “begotten” is so deep with meaning. It has to do with the “nature” of someone or something. In other words, ONLY GOD can “beget” the Son. In other words, He is not merely God’s “only” Son (though this is certainly true), it means that in his relation to God as the Son, He is “like” God. And, not in the way we are said to be “like” God. But in a unique way, the Son IS the “same” as God, in his essence. We’ve seen this in cp. 1 as Jesus IS “life.” Jesus IS “light.” As the Nicene Creed says We believe . . . **“in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.”** This truth is the basis of everything we know and believe and understand and receive concerning the sending of the Son. (For another day, theologians describe this reality by saying the Son is eternally generated from the Father.)

Now, back to our truth. What does God do because he loves the world? He sends his only begotten Son into this sinful world. Brothers and sisters, at the very heart (center) of the Bible we find the love of God, which is displayed in the sending of the Son. And why did he come? Look at 17 again: **“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.”** This is the love of God in sending the Son; and only through Him can the world be saved!

Question: if the world is condemned because of sin, and if you and I are part of this world as condemned, how can Paul say in Rom. 8:1: **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** How can we be saved? We could get our answer from many verses. But, one of my favorites is Mark 10:45, which answers our question. Jesus says, **“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** This is why God sent the Son! For ONLY the Son could serve the will of the Father to save sinners. So, how does He serve the will of the Father in sending him to this world? He gives the greatest of all servants . . . to lay down his life as a ransom. This is the cross. And what did Jesus do on the cross? He laid down his life as a sacrifice, a ransom, a payment to the Father for the many. This answers our question: What does God because He loves the world? He sends his Son to die. This is why he came! Yes, he came to do many things. But, this was his purpose. And ONLY through accomplishing this service can anyone be saved! Not just the Jews, not just the Americans, not just the Russians or the Chinese or the Arabs, etc., but the world!

I think John would have been thinking of Abraham offering up his Son, the Son of the promise, Isaac, on the altar. And it would have been just for Isaac (a sinful man) to be offered up on that altar, for the “wages of sin is death.” But, God stops Abraham and provides another sacrifice, a ram caught in the bushes nearby. But, not so with God and his ONLY Son. And there is a BIG difference. Jesus the Son did not deserve what he received in death. *“for the wages of sin is death.”* But, Jesus did not sin. He was sinless. Yet, He offered himself as the sin-bearing sacrifice. Brothers and sisters! This is the love of God! And Nothing Compares to such Love! (which brings us to our final truth)

3. Who are the recipients of this love? We are! This is why we gather! We come here weekly to worship the Father in the giving of the Son. And we pray in Jesus’ name! And who are we? From one perspective we are chosen before foundations of the world (Eph. 1:4). But John does not emphasize this truth in in our verses. What does he say about those who are saved? Verse 16: those who “BELIEVE” in the Son. Look back at vv. 14-15: **“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.”** John 6:29: Jesus says **“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”** John 8:24: **“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”** John 11:26: **“Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”** Why did John write his gospel? In 20:31 he says, **“but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**

Two applications.

The love of Christ (which flows from the Father) compels us to do everything we do. In 2 Cor. 5:14 Paul says: **“For the love of Christ controls us . . .”** In other words, the love of Christ is the heart motive of everything we do. This is why I preach Christ, his person and work, over and over and over. He is the “vine” we are the “branches” (John 15). Without Him we can do nothing! So, focus your attention on what Christ has done for you and why he came. “For God so loved . . . the world” (and such is the love of Christ).

ii. God has given his ministry of reconciling the world to us. 2 Cor. 5:17-19 says: **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.**

So, Go and Tell the world about the love of God in Christ. John 3:16 is a perfect place to start! Paul says in Rom. 10:14-15: **“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”**