

LESSON 2

THE GREATEST GIFT EVER GIVEN

John 3:16–21

Have you ever received a terrible gift? Gift-giving is an art, and some people aren't as "artistic" as others. A quick online search of "worst gifts" yields some interesting results. I've personally heard some crazy stories through the years. One person received his own gift regifted back to him the next year. Oops! Another poor teenage girl received a book for Christmas titled *Coping with Being Adopted*. That was news to her!

1. What is the worst gift you were ever given? What made it so bad?
2. What is the best gift you ever received? What made it so good?
3. Evaluate this statement: Who a gift is from is more important than what it is. Is this true? How does this apply to the gifts God gives?

John 3:16–21 clearly teaches us that God is the greatest gift giver, Who gave the greatest gift in history. One reason this gift was so great is that God gave His gift knowing many would reject it.

This section of our Bible study includes John 3:16, which is probably the most famous verse in the Bible. Martin Luther called this verse “the gospel in miniature” because it shows us the vastness and greatness of God’s love. But if we’re not careful, we can make this section me-centered instead of God-centered. It is tremendously God centered! It’s about what God did and what God gave. In fact, these verses teach us about His marvelous gift of salvation. It’s not that *some* people reject His gift; it’s that *all* people will reject His gift because of their sin nature.

The real scandal of these verses is that God both *gives* and helps us *receive* the greatest gift in history. If someone rejected a gift you gave, wouldn’t you give up? That’s not how God works. He is working on both sides: giving and receiving.

4. When was the first time you heard John 3:16?

5. Read John 3:16–21. What do you learn when putting verse 16 in context?

Loving and Giving

I can hear my five-year-old’s voice in my head quoting John 3:16. It is a staple in Sunday School and other church programs. God “sooo” loved the world. What does that mean? For many people this conjures up the image of God holding His arms wide saying “I love you *this* much!” That is a *quantitative* interpretation.

In actuality, however, this phrase is not quantitative, but qualitative. These words set the stage for the rest of the verse. It would be like saying, “This is the extent to which God loves.” The rest of the verse tells us the extent.

The destination of God's love is the world. This is not easy love. As humans, we naturally love what is lovely. We love that which will love us back. We love what is *easy* to love. For us, loving the whole world would not be an easy love. The world is the playing field of mankind's rebellion. It is the realm wherein hatred for God rules. It is the very sphere into which God sent His love.

6. What kinds of things are easy to love? What is hard to love?

7. If you have a Bible on an electronic device, do a quick search for the word "world." What did you find?

Unwrapping the gift

What did God give? Instead of giving money or something tangible, God gave a person. He gave of Himself. He gave His Son, and there was a unique and inextricable bond between the Father and the Son. In the first verse of this book, John laid out this mystery of the Godhead: Jesus is God and with God simultaneously. Jesus is part of the Godhead. So when God gave Jesus, He gave us Himself.

Nobody can accuse God of taking the easy way out. He did not send Jesus to do His dirty work. Jesus did not draw the short straw. We believe in one God Who eternally exists in three persons. From eternity past this was God's plan: the Second Person of the Godhead would become a human, live a perfect life, and suffer and die for the sin of humanity.

8. What are some difficulties you've encountered with understanding the Trinity?

9. What is your response when you hear truths like these?

A useful gift

When I was a kid, one of the best parts about Christmas was tearing into the gifts and playing with everything on the same day. Receiving the gift was fun; using the gift was even better! Read the end of verse 16, where you find a negative and a positive statement. The gift that God gives keeps us *from* something and saves us *to* something. It keeps us from perishing and saves us to eternal life. Perishing is not annihilation. It is an eternal ruin in Hell, separated from God. Eternal life is living in Heaven in the presence of God forever. It begins the moment you accept the gift of salvation.

In Tombstone, Arizona, there is an epitaph for a man by the name of Les Moore. This poor man must have had some pretty irreverent friends, because they wrote these words on his tombstone: “Here lies Les Moore. No Les—No More.” Unless the Lord returns, all of us will face physical death. However, for those who receive the gift of salvation through Christ, physical death is simply a gateway to a greater and fuller life. This is the promise of eternal life!

10. How does the promise of eternal life in Jesus give you strength for today?

11. Many times we think of eternal life as being a future reality. How can we enjoy eternal life in the here and now?

Offering and Saving

As we worked through verse 16, I’m sure someone noticed we missed a few words. You might have been thinking, “What about *whosoever believeth*?” Don’t worry, I wouldn’t skip that part. Verses 17 and 18 expand on belief, so we’ll deal with it now.

The big “if”

God loves, God gives, God offers. However, God’s saving act is activated by belief. Verse 16 states “whosoever believeth.” Verse 18 reiterates that same thought—“he that believeth” and “he that believeth not.” Belief is the means by which we accept the greatest gift from the greatest Giver. No one can be saved without believing.

12. What does it mean to believe? Compare your answer with others in your group.

13. What does the word “whosoever” entail? What does that tell you about God?

A contingency with a purpose

Why does God require belief? So that we can be saved and escape inevitable condemnation! Sometimes people think about God in terms of anger, judgment, or sending people to Hell. These verses beautifully tell us that God sent Jesus *not* to send people to Hell but that the world might escape Hell. However, the truth remains that some people are condemned.

This is difficult to grasp. God desires all people to be saved. So the next logical question is *Why aren’t all people saved?* The Bible consistently presents both sides of God’s character. He is both loving and just. These characteristics are not mutually exclusive but, rather, work together.

On one hand, God punishes evil because He is both loving *and* just. A judge who always acquits people would be considered a horrible judge. On the other hand, God mercifully saves people because He is both loving and just. His love provided a way through Jesus, and His justice is satisfied in Christ’s sacrifice.

14. How would you feel if a judge pardoned a person who had murdered your friend? Would you consider that judge just or loving?

15. How does the phrase “whosoever believeth” give you hope?

“Not” and “already”

Verse 18 lays the responsibility for belief and disbelief squarely at our feet. If we believe, we receive the gift of salvation and we will not be condemned. Belief yields eternal life.

Failure to believe results in condemnation. However, verse 18 teaches us something very interesting. Whoever does not believe is condemned *already*. This statement means that prior to belief, a person is already living in a state of condemnation. Believing moves us from condemned to saved. From death to life. Not believing in Jesus for salvation is tantamount to self-condemnation. God is not to blame for the condemnation, but rather a person's unbelief is.

16. If an unbeliever is condemned “already,” when did that condemnation begin in a person's existence?

Overcoming

Read verses 19–21 and note the tension of the text. God loves, God gives, God offers, and God is willing to save. He makes the gift available to “whosoever.” However, when He shined the light of His salvation into this dark realm, it was rejected. Why would this be the case?

By nature

Jesus made some sweeping statements in verses 19 and 20. God shined His light into the world, but people rejected it because they loved darkness rather than light. The reason people love darkness is because their deeds are evil and they know the light will expose their deeds. So, how many people does this include?

Who are the haters of the light? Verse 20 states that everyone who sins hates the light. I have bad news for us all. This verse condemns all of us. We are all sinners by nature; therefore, we are all—by nature—haters of the light. The light confronts us in our sin, and we don't enjoy being confronted.

Salvation is a gift. Most gifts are easy to accept. This gift, however, is difficult to accept because it's confrontational. To illustrate, what if someone gave you a nicely wrapped present. You opened it up to find an envelope. Inside the envelope was a certificate offering you free enrollment in a weight-loss program. Yes, it's a gift, but it's also a confrontation. Or what if your coworkers pooled their money and bought you a birthday gift. You opened it up and found a year's supply of breath mints? That's not a gift—it's a hint!

The fact that God gave Jesus for our sins shows we have a serious problem. We needed help. Yet, as verse 20 reminds us, none of us would ever voluntarily turn from our sin and believe in Jesus. That's a big problem.

17. The Bible clearly teaches that we are all sinners by nature. How is the sin nature evidenced in small children?

18. Can you share a story of someone you knew who was vehemently opposed to spiritual things (hated the light) but who later came to know Christ? What changed?

God can overpower nature

God is sovereign and wields power over nature. He orders the weather and commands the oceans to move as He sees fit. We wonder and marvel at this display of power, but His power to overcome our nature of sinfulness is equally impressive. John 3:19 and 20 are clear: everybody is sinful; therefore everybody hates the light. For us to believe, God must break through our sinful hearts.

19. Read John 3:21. What is significant to you? Does it seem at all confusing?

20. Is this verse teaching that you must do good works *before* coming to the light?

21. How does the last phrase help to illuminate the rest of the verse?

The key to John 3:16–21 is found in verse 21. God loves, God gives, God offers, God is willing to save. When the gift arrives, however, people reject it because people love darkness rather than light. Yet, verse 16 uses the word “whosoever,” implying that belief is not an impossibility. So how is hard-heartedness cured?

Let me give a helpful example. Let’s pretend I decided to give my two-year-old daughter a birthday gift for her third birthday. Instead of just giving her the gift, I offered her a choice. We walk out to the driveway, and I have two cars wrapped in bows. One car is a beautiful Tesla™ sedan valued at \$70,000. The other is a pink battery-powered Barbie™ car. I can guess with 100 percent accuracy that my daughter will choose the Barbie™ car. Why? Because she doesn’t understand the value of the Tesla™! Someday her desires and affections will change, and she will realize what a terrible mistake she made. What does that illustrate? It illustrates that we all have a free choice to accept God’s gift of salvation.

The end of verse 21 teaches us that if we love good instead of evil, we demonstrate that we have come into the light. And once we are in the light, it is evident that God enabled us to do the good deeds. In other words, if we accept the greatest gift, given by the greatest Giver, it’s because God broke through our blindness and opened our eyes to see the value of Jesus. Once our eyes were opened, we were able to choose Jesus over our sin because we could see He is better in every way.

This is magnificent! The clear truth of these verses is this: God both *gives* and helps us *receive* the greatest gift in history. Yet at the same time, this text distinctly teaches the “whosoever.” It’s a wonderful joy to know that God’s love is for everybody. Hopefully, this leaves you with a smile on your face, returning again and again to taste the glorious love of God.

22. What is your response after hearing the truth of these verses?

Memorize: John 3:16 and 17

Prayer: Thank You, Loving Heavenly Father, for giving a gift You knew would be rejected. Thank You for not giving up on humanity and not giving up on me. Thank You for opening my eyes to the truth of Jesus and for giving me the greatest gift in history.

