

God's Great Gift

John 3:16

For most people, Christmas is a time of focusing on gift-giving... We spend weeks, if not months, looking for the right gift for the right person – if not trying to drop hints to the right person about what we may want... The giving and receiving of gifts is actually a very good thing in life – and today it certainly dominates what Christmas has become for so many.

Christians, of course, know that Christmas is about so much more than the materialism it has become. Yet, I would argue that it is not wrong to think about gifts as a legitimate way of expressing your love to others...

Many of us have read Gary Chapman's book, Five Love Languages, where he points out that we each have a preferred way of communicating our love to others. There is physical affection, words of affirmation, acts of service, spending quality time together – and the giving of gifts... They are all legitimate – but the challenge comes in learning to speak the preferred language of the ones we love... If we could do that – our marriages and family relationships in particular, would improve drastically overnight...

God Himself communicates His love through gift-giving!

Let's think about that today.

I once read that the entire Gospel of John has been translated into more languages than any other book in the Bible... And **John 3:16** has found its way into even more languages, than have yet to have a complete book of the Bible...

Why is that? Why would this simple statement that Jesus uttered to Nicodemus one night, become so precious that it is recognized even by non-believers simply by its reference?... How many times have you seen “*John 3:16*” on display somewhere in public? When we do, we immediately begin to quote it in our minds...

Martin Luther once called John 3:16 – “the Bible in miniature”.

Chuck Smith says – “This is perhaps the greatest text in the Bible. The whole gospel is declared in a few simple words. Yet so profound, few have dared to preach from this text. To do so is to court failure, no way can we ever fathom the depths that are here.”

I think he's right... When I first outlined this verse, there were 9 major points we could spend all afternoon considering, and still not exhaust all the truth revealed in this one verse... So, as we approach this text today, we do so with the awareness that there is so much more here than we could ever capture and fully appreciate in one setting... Nevertheless, I can think of perhaps no better text to consider at Christmas time than this one.

We are going to consider God's Great Gift... What makes a gift great?

When I was a young man, my mom tried to teach me a lesson. I say “tried”, because I have not always followed that lesson very well... She tried to teach me how to go about determining what gift to get someone, when you want to give them a gift: First, try to think of something that person would really need and would like to have – but either cannot, or would not get for themselves... And that will help you find the ideal gift...

Well – that is *exactly* what God's Great Gift is... He provides exactly what we need – what we would

truly like to have, if we understand our need – and what we absolutely cannot get for ourselves.

John 3:16 (NASB) “For God so loved the world, that He gave His [a]only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

This great sentence, which is indeed the Bible in miniature, begins with God and ends with eternal life.

John Phillips, in his commentary on this verse, says – “It begins with that which has no beginning. It ends with that which has no ending” (Exploring John, Pg. 75).

As we think through this verse, let’s begin by observing how –

1. God’s Gift Displays God’s Character (:16a)

“For God so loved the world...”

We are told in 1 John 4:8 and 1 John 4:16 that “God is love”... In other words – love is not simply something that God exercises – it is something of Who He is! Love speaks to the very essence of His being! God is love...

What does it mean, when the Bible says “God so loved the world”? What is meant by *world*?

It is not saying that God is the Ultimate environmentalist – though He truly cares about what He created... After all, it would simply disintegrate if He takes His hand off it...

It does not mean that God loves the “systems of the world” that actually hate Him... That would mean that God is guilty of doing something He actually commands us not to do:

1 John 2:15 (NASB) “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

The context makes it clear that the term “world” is referring to the people of the world... God loves the *people* of the world – all of the world...

Though there is a different kind of love for those in His family – we would be doing an injustice to the text to try and narrow down, or minimize His love to only the saved – the elect.

John Calvin said referring to this text – “Christ brought life because the heavenly Father loves the human race and wishes that they should not perish ... Christ employed the universal term *whosoever*, both to invite indiscriminately all to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers” (Quoted in J. C. Ryle, “Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, Volume III”, page 158).

There are four statements we need to consider that will help us better grasp and understand God’s love:

- First, **God’s love is uninfluenced**. There was nothing in the world that influences God to love us... God loves us because He loves us... This is one of the real differences between human love and God’s love. All too often, human love is based on the loveliness and “lovability” of the one loved.

Consider the world that God loved: It is a world that is in rebellion against Him, who hated Him... A world whose beauty had become marred by curse from sin... A world of greed, strife, hatred, and wars... Yet God loved it.

God's love is totally uninfluenced. The only explanation for "God so loved the world" is that He chose to...

- Second, **God's love is unending**... Because God is love and God is eternal and God never changes – His love is unending...
- The third statement about **God's love** is that it is **unconditional**... Since His love is uninfluenced, He does not stop loving us when we act unworthy of His love... We have always been unworthy of His love...

God loves a world that lacks the capacity of loving Him on their own...

- The fourth statement is **God's love** is **is a holy** love. God's love does not cause Him to "wink at our sin", overlook or ignore it... God's love does not cancel out His holiness... His love for the world does not cancel out His wrath and justice for those who do not believe on Him... None of God's attributes are contradictory to any other attribute of God...

This leads to our need to consider the next major point in this verse:

2. God's Gift Remedies Man's Plight (:16d)

"... shall not perish ..."

We need to jump to this point in the verse, so we can see our need, before we can consider God's solution to that need.

The word "**perish**" relates to the wrath of God – and it means to eternally destroy... Because of sin we are perishing...

Phil Jones – "This verse is not just an invitation to believe in Jesus; it is a warning to flee from God's wrath that results in our perishing".

There are many today who think themselves to be too intelligent to believe that there is such a place called hell, or that there is such a thing as "perishing"... Why is that? Is it because we have "matured" beyond such notions – that any such belief is equivalent to the mythologies once believed by others?...

No – the reason people run from these truths is explained in Romans 1:

Rom. 1:18 (NASB) "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness"

Without God's intervening grace – we would all be pushing away, pushing down and running from the truth God has revealed!... Left to our sinful condition, we "hate" God and all He is...

The central message of the Bible is that since Adam's disobedience, he and all of his descendants have been plunged into sin and are spiritually dead and separated from God (**Rom. 5:12-21**)... The Bible is clear that spiritually dead people cannot do anything about their fallen condition (**Matt. 19:25-26**). In mankind's spiritual condition, we were unable to even comprehend spiritual truth much less earn God's favor (**1 Cor. 2:14, Eph 4:18**)...

Listen to some of the words and phrases used to describe all of humankind – (Phil Jones' list)

Phrases that describe every descendent of Adam:

- Enemies of God (**Rom. 5:10, Jam. 4:4**)

- Alienated from God (Col. 1:21)
- Hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7)
- Haters of God (Rom. 1:30)
- Subject to God's wrath (Rom. 1:18)
- Children of Satan (John 8:44)
- Members of Satan's kingdom (Col. 1:13)
- Under Satan's control (Eph. 2:2)
- Slaves to sin (Rom. 6:17)

Surely these terms persuade us that we “*deserve*” God's wrath?...

We really don't even have to leave the context of John 3 to understand the reason people refuse to believe... It is because of their love – their preference for their sin:

John 3:19-20 (NASB)

“¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”

The next great truth that we need to learn about this great gift is that –

3. God's Gift is God's Son (:16b)

“... that He gave His only begotten Son ...”

“only begotten” is best understood to mean “unique”, or “only one of His kind”...

We need to understand just Who this Son is. In the opening words of this book, the Lord through John gives us even more insight into Who He is –

John 1:1 (NASB) “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

We are told three things about Him in this verse:

- One, He is God. “The Word was God”.
- Two, He is with God, and therefore distinct from God. “The word was with God”.
- And third, He was therefore always in existence and never came to be. “In the beginning was the Word”.

We can never understand the love of God apart from the cross of Christ.

God so loved the world that He gave His unique, one of a kind Son – not just to communicate what God is like to us – though Jesus did show us the Father and said that when we have seen Him we have seen the Father (John 14:9) – God did not give His only begotten Son primarily to be our example or to teach us (though He was our example and certainly did teach us)...

The giving of His Son was primarily for the salvation of His people!

Rom. 5:8 (NASB)

⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

It is only when we come to realize that Jesus' death was on our behalf – that He endured fully the wrath of a Holy God that we deserve – do we realize that our salvation is completely the gracious work of God!

Peter said it well –

1 Peter 1:18-19 (NASB)

¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ.

God SO loved the world that He gave His one of a kind Son to pay the sin debt for all who would *savingly believe* on Him!

In the words of Paul –

2 Cor. 9:15 (NASB) “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”

4. God's Gift Requires a Response (:16c)

“... that whoever believes in Him ...”

As we saw in the illustration of salvation from the incident in Numbers 21, to believe requires turning from everything else and looking to Jesus alone in total reliance, total trust, and total dependence on His great act of love on the cross in taking the wrath that we deserved for our sins.

There are many who want to debate the meaning of the “whoever” in this verse. They want to never think of the term outside of those who are the elect of God – because they know that only the elect of God will be the ones who will “believe”... But we must not underemphasize the appeal of God's Word to the “whoever”.

John Piper, who is one of the most reformed theologians in our day – and I share his convictions about the doctrine of election, says it much better than I can: – “It is the great mass of fallen humanity that needs salvation. It's the countless number of perishing people from whom the ‘whoevers’ come in the second part of the verse: ‘that whoever believes in him should not perish.’ The world is the great ocean of perishing sinners from whom the whoever comes.”

The simple question – the real question – that must be answered is – what is your response?

John Piper also said:– “These are the greatest things that can be. What could be more important? What could be more relevant for you right now? What could be more urgent for you or momentous for you than to know where you stand in relation to what God says to you in this verse?”

Make no mistake – there is no such thing as a non-response when it comes to this gift! There is no “neutral” ground upon which you can stand. You can't say, I'm not committed to accepting or rejecting

– I’m still undecided... The reality is we are all citizens of the fallen – residents of a spiritual cemetery – until we cross the border into the land of the living! Only when one believes / trusts / receives God’s Great Gift – do they become citizens in the land of the living and begin to experience this great gift!...

You need this gift!... Everyone does... Don’t believe the lie that try to tell you you’re ok without receiving Christ.

Adrian Rogers – “The worst form of badness is human goodness when that human goodness becomes a substitute for the new birth.”

John 1:12 (NASB) “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name”

What happens when one responds in the affirmative?

5. God’s Gift is Enjoyed Now (:16e)

“... have eternal life.”

When we think of “everlasting life”, or “eternal life” – we usually think about the *quantity* – the never-ending aspect to this life. The reality that there is more life to come even after we die...

However, the term actually refers to the *quality* of life... The truth that is often missed by focusing on the “forever” aspect of this life – is that “eternal life” is Christ’s very life that we become partakers of when we are united with Him at salvation...

Notice the tense of the verb **have**. It is present! Eternal life is something the believer possesses right now!... There is also an aspect to this term that is often missed – and that is – this possession is something to be *enjoyed*! Eternal life is something the believer has and enjoys NOW – not merely when they reach the end of life in this fallen world...

So which is it – *quantity* or *quality*?... The answer is BOTH!

This message has been very basic – but you will never hear a message that is more important! I want to close by sharing an old quote, that the old-time preachers use to say – “*Life is short; death is sure; Sin the curse, Christ the cure; Hell is hot, heaven is sweet; Sin is black, judgment pure; Jesus saves!*”

Will you receive Him today – God’s Greatest Gift?

Questions to consider in Community Group: (Since the list is a bit lone, feel free to “boil them down” to those you think most beneficial to your group.)

- What is your preferred “love language”? (affection, words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time, gifts)
- The Bible says “God is love” – not simply that He loves. How do you know He IS love?

- What were the four truths stated about God’s love in the message? Can you think of other aspects of His love?
- Pastor Phil said – “This verse is not just an invitation to believe in Jesus; it is a warning to flee from God’s wrath that results in our perishing”. What do you understand it means to “perish”? Why, do you suppose, that word has just about disappeared from our vocabulary today?
- How does the Bible describe an unbeliever? Why do you suppose, those descriptions are so “negative”?
- What is, or rather, Who is God’s great gift? What terms does the Bible use to describe Him? In addition to those terms, how should we describe Him to others – especially non-believers?
- What are your thoughts about the John Piper quote> – “It is the great mass of fallen humanity that needs salvation. It’s the countless number of perishing people from whom the ‘whoever’s come in the second part of the verse: ‘that whoever believes in him should not perish.’ The world is the great ocean of perishing sinners from whom the whoever comes.”
- What do you think about the Adrian Rogers’ quote? – “The worst form of badness is human goodness when that human goodness becomes a substitute for the new birth.”
- How would you explain “eternal life”, as promised in this verse? What in your life can you point to, that demonstrates the “quality” of this life?
- What else do you see in this passage, that may have not been covered in the message?