

A NEW LOOK AT JOHN 3:16

Date: May 1, 2022

Words: 5980

Reading: John 3:14-21

INTRO: I read an article some time ago that questioned the general understanding of John 3:16. Having studied the word *agape*, translated love, for some years it caught my interest and I began to make a study of my own. Here is the question: What does the word "so" mean in John 3:16. We are in a time of a "love" saturated Christianity. I have spent much time trying to understand the word *agapee* translated "love" as used in the NT. We are all familiar with the Greek word *agapee* because we hear it quite often.

We live in a time when the church is supposedly *agapee* love saturated. The problem is we understand the word *agapee* from our English word love. How did we become such a "love" saturated church? Many years ago I read a book on D. L. Moody. He is the Moody after whom the Moody Bible Institute is named. Let me read you an account of what I see as the beginning of the present love message in the Church today. Moody died in 1899 so that is over 120 years ago.

I am quoting from an article on the internet although I have read this in a book on Moody as well. I quote:

"While in Great Britain, D. L. Moody met a young Englishman by the name of Henry Moorhouse. One day Moorhouse said to Moody, "I am thinking of going to America." "Well," said Moody, "if you should ever be in Chicago, come down to my place and I will give you a chance to preach."

"Now Mr. Moody was not two-faced, he was merely trying to be polite, but mentally he was saying, "I hope he won't come." There are so many people, you know, who want to preach, even though God never meant them to, and Mr. Moody was not quite sure of Mr. Moorhouse.

"Mr. Moody was rather taken back one day when, just before leaving for a series of meetings, he received a telegram from Moorhouse which stated that he had just arrived in New York and that he would be in Chicago on Sunday. "And now I'm going away," Moody thought, "and I told him he could preach here." So he told his wife and his committee that a young Englishman was coming

and to allow him to preach once. "If the people enjoy him," Moody added, "then put him on again."

When Moody returned he asked his wife, "Well, what about that young preacher?"

"Oh, he is a better preacher than you are."

"Why?" said Moody. "He is telling sinners that God loves them." "He is wrong! God doesn't love sinners!"

"Well, go and hear him." replied his wife.

"Why? Is he still preaching?" asked Mr. Moody.

"Yes, he has been preaching all week and has taken only one text, **John 3:16.**"

"As he listened he discovered Moorhouse was still on the same text, and that souls were being wonderfully saved. Moody confided to a friend, 'I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out; I could not keep back the tears. I just drank it in. So did the crowded congregation. I tell you there is one thing that draws above everything else in the world and that is love.'

"Mr. Moody was present at the meeting when Moorhouse got up and said, 'I have been hunting and hunting all through the Bible looking for a text, and I think we will just talk about **John 3:16** once more.'

"Mr. Moody always testified that it was on that night that he got his first clear understanding of the gospel and the love of God. Think what that meant in Moody's life, and in the lives of tens of thousands who were reached through his ministry- to know that God loves sinners!"

"On one occasion, young Moorhouse challenged Moody, 'You are sailing on the wrong tack. If you will change your course, and learn to preach God's words instead of your own, He will make you a great power.'

"Moody's evangelistic preaching was to take on a different tenor than that of so much previous revivalistic preaching in the American tradition. From that point on there was also a new emphasis on God's love for the sinner." End quote.

The article said of Henry Moorehouse that he was the man that moved the man that moved the world. I believe it was those messages that were the beginning of what morphed into the modern view of love. I have little doubt that it started out well and it was a needed message of that day. But over time that teaching has morphed into a phrase that would be born years later known as "unconditional love."

I read a good number of years ago about a man who spoke on college campuses all over America. And he said that when he used to ask what verse everybody knew, it was John 3:16. But by that time it had changed to, "Judge not that you be not judged." And here is my question: Has the modern message of love caused present day Christians to believe that judging is not loving? The phrase "unconditional love" is relatively new. I understand it was coined by the German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in 1934 and was later developed in his book called, "The Art of Loving." He was a leading Marxist sociologist.

I was recently told of a book by Erwin Lutzer called, "Who are you to Judge?" Lutzer was the former pastor of the Moody Church but from the table of contents I recommend this book.

I. THE DEFINITION OF LOVE

So let me briefly give a definition of agapee love as I understand it.

Now I think at the time love began to be preached more among Christians, in general the teaching of love was a great need in the Church and it may well have started off well. But it seems to me that from there the teaching of the love of God progressed until it became the predominant attribute of God and thus, today we have a mushy, gushy love and a mushy gushy God. The teaching of unconditional love is so popular that to question it is almost to be branded a heretic.

As you know, there are four Greek words we translate as love. Three of those occur in the NT. There is *stergo* love, which I would say is something like loyalty love. Then there is *phileo* love, which is family or friendship love. Then there is *erao* love, which is not found in the NT but it is the love of the relationship between husband and wife.

I would say those loves are emotional loves. But then there is agapee love. This is not an emotional love. In our day

we cannot think of love without thinking of emotions or without attaching some sensual idea to it. I understand that to the Greeks, agapee love was on the bottom rung of the love ladder. But in the NT it is the top rung. As a matter of fact, the love our cultures exalt to the top is *erao* love and this word does not even occur in the NT.

I believe agapee love is a mental and logical love. I have defined agapee love like this:

Agapee love for people is a mental and rational attraction or attachment to others based on truth or factual information which causes one to seek the legitimate welfare of another person or persons which in turn brings about mutual fulfillment.

The agapee love the Bible promotes is turned outward, or is others oriented. It has the welfare of others in view. When agapee love is turned inward, it becomes selfish love.

So, 1 John 2:15 says this:

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

I confess I do not yet fully understand this word agapee love. But as I see it, when we love the world, we have a mental or rational attraction to others or the things in the world, but instead of seeking the good of others we seek to gain what it has to offer for ourselves; we are not seeking the welfare of others. This causes us to be caught up with the things of the world or its fads and fashions and in this way the devil ensnares us and takes us away from God.

When it says God loved the world, that love is others oriented. He is not seeking what He can get out of it, He is seeking the welfare of the world and there is only one way to do that and that is by first saving lost people from their sin. So John 3:16 says:

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

We are to love God with agapee love. When we love God, we seek that which He wants from us; we want to please Him. We

do not seek Him for our good, but for His. The prosperity Gospel seeks God for their personal gain. When we truly learn to love God, this in turn ends up being for our good. So the Bible says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness AND all these things will be added to you." Loving God for what He desires brings glory to Him and ends up being for our own good.

The ground from which agapee love works is truth. True agapee love does what is right, regardless of one's emotions and it seeks the welfare of others, not our own. Listen to today's popular choruses that speak of love and you will see that this aspect is almost, if not entirely lacking. And sometimes erao love is the message of the song and it is sacrilegious to put it mildly, to sing in that way.

Some years ago there was a VBS theme on God's love and it was titled: "God is crazy about you!" I typed in on the internet for choruses on love and one site immediately came up. There was a picture of a man with a face full of laughter and printed in large print were these words:

"These are stories about God's love for you. The Christian journey begins with the recognition that you are unconditionally, irrevocably, ridiculously loved by God just as you are. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done in the course of your life, you are already loved and accepted."

When I opened it up it said:

"Transformed!

["God's love is for you to share through concrete action](#)

"Get this: You are ALREADY loved by God. Full Stop. No conditions. No qualifications. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. You are ALREADY a beloved child of God."

"In the church world we have a word for this love - we call it *grace*." End quote. I ask, is the word *love* called *grace*? That is a huge theological error. The article then goes on to define grace.

"The bible is a great starting point for better understanding what grace is all about. According to New

Testament lexicographer, Dr. Spiros Zodhiates - and with a name like that you know he means business

- grace is:

that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor and acceptance. A favor done without any expectation of return, the absolute free expression of the love of God finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the giver... It changes the individual to a new creature..."

the first step

"The Christian journey begins with accepting that grace. Before you can really love others, you need to recognize that you are unconditionally, irrevocably, ridiculously loved by God just as you are. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done in the course of your life, you are ALREADY loved and accepted." End quote. It would take long to explain the errors in that.

https://www.hillsidemedford.org/transforming-love/?gclid=Cj0KCOjwpeaYBhDXARIsAEzItbGIMYI9HODu_wtEAefBltFImHs84fOWKEUFLdrX83M2cMIbm5hq5ZYaAleVEALw_wcB

Let me give you an example of love from our modern culture from the song "Unstoppable Love" by a group called Jesus Culture:

Try to stop Your love (i.e. God's love)
And You would wage a war
Try to take the very thing
You gave Your life for

And You would come running
Tear down every wall
All the while shouting
My love you're worth it all

God, You pursue me with power and glory
Unstoppable love that never ends
You're unrelenting with passion and mercy
Unstoppable love that never ends

You broke into the silence
And sang a song of hope
A melody resounding
In the deep of my soul

You have come running
You tore down every wall
All the while shouting
My love you're worth it all

Another stanza:

No sin, no shame, no past, no pain
Can separate me from Your love
No height, no depth, no fear, no death
Can separate me from Your love, Your love

It would be a nightmare to sift the truth from the error in that song.

Agapee love does what is right. That does not mean there are never any emotions involved, but it is based on knowing what is right and doing it for the welfare of another, not oneself. Husbands are instructed to love their wives. Every married man knows that those highly sought after emotional highs, which is another love, is not nearly always present. But doing what is right for my wife, which is for her welfare, is often required without any wonderful emotions present. There may be times when that is the last thing we want to do, but it is the right thing to do; and to love her as the Bible instructs means doing that very thing.

So, when it says God so loved the world, what does that mean? It means He did that which was right to do and it was for the welfare of lost sinners. It is not some fuzzy emotion. It is commitment to do right.

Now let me add that we are talking about agapee love. By saying it is not an emotion we are not saying unkindness and hardness and coldness are OK. We are to be kind one to another.

II. THE MEANING OF "SO"

So, having looked at the word "love" let us now consider the little word translated "so."

A. The Options

1. Extent - how much

In English, the translation "For God so loved the world" could mean He loved the world to such an extent. That is, He loved the world sooooo much.

The natural idea we get is that it is an emotion, that is, He loved the world sooooo very much. And to satisfy that emotion of love for me and you, He was willing to gave up His Son on the cross for us. That is one option of the meaning of the word "so" in this verse in English. When it is so understood, and we usually do, it tells us the extent that God loved us.

2. Manner - how? in what way

The second option of the word so is that it could mean in what way He loved the world. The idea would then be that God loved the world in this manner. That is, the manner in which He loved man is that He gave His only begotten Son in death on the cross to save sinful man. Rather than fulfilling an emotion He did that which was right for Him to do.

B. The interpretation

Our question then is, what is the right interpretation? Did God soooo love the world that He gave His only begotten Son, or did He love the world in this way, that is, by giving His only begotten Son? Well, the word translated "so" is *houto*. In Scripture, from what I can find, this word never means extent. That is, it does not mean that God loved the world soooooo much. The word is used 206 times and I cannot find that it ever means extent and it almost, if not always means the manner in which something is done.

If this is correct, here is how this verse should be translated literally: "For in this way," or, "For thus God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." In other words it tells us in what way God loved the world, not how much He loved the world. If you would look up this word "houto" that is what it means time after time when it occurs in the NT.

Let me give an example. Turn to Matthew 6:9. It says:

9 "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

The word translated "in this manner" is our word "houto". It is not, "pray soooo much." He is saying,

"Pray thus," or "Pray like this" or as it is rightly translated, "In this manner, therefore, pray..." And I could give example after example of this.

If John 3:16 had meant God loved the world sooooo much there is a Greek word for that. One night the apostle Peter and a few others had been fishing and had caught nothing. And Jesus was standing on the shore and He told them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. If you are a fisherman, that sounds very strange. Nevertheless, since it was Jesus, they did as He instructed and now they caught a net full of fish. So listen to John 21:11:

11 Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were soooo many, the net was not broken.

The word translated "so" here is not the word *houto*. It is the word *tosutos* and it means soooo many.

C. The Context of John 3:16

Now look at the immediate context of John 3:16. We begin in verse 14 says:

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up...

The word translated "even so" is the same word translated "so" in verse 16. You would not translate it, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, soooo must the Son of Man be lifted up..." If we translated *houto* in verse 16 like that we have this:

16 "for thus" or "in this way" [houto] God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Agapee love is not based on emotions. It is based in truth. The love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 says that agapee love rejoices in the truth. Let me illustrate. A man who marries a wife is commanded to love her. You know that word "love" cannot mean the emotions because you cannot command emotions. You can command logic. When one is married and you have children, you know

that down the road you will have problems. But you love that child, phileo, love even though they err. But if you agapee love that child you will discipline that child when it does wrong. When you discipline you are doing right. When you fail to discipline because you love them soooo much, that is not acting on behalf of the welfare of that child.

When man sinned, God had compassion on man and His love caused Him to do what was right for Him to do and it caused Him to give His Son in death for sinful man. When God has done all He can rightly do, He is not responsible to do more. When He gave His only Son, He had done all He could do. If man does not meet the requirements of repentance and faith to be saved, that is now man's own fault.

So I ask, does love have no feelings then? Is it all obligation? Is there no emotion? God has plenty of emotion but it is not expressed in the word *love*, but in the word *compassion*. Compassion, as an emotion, is not stressed as much as we stress love. Agape love, is not an emotion. It is doing that which is right to do. It is right for a man to take care of his wife's needs when he marries her, and we can say that he is loving (agapee) his wife when he cares for her. Maybe that is why the KJV translates this word as charity.

The emotion God feels for the lost is expressed by His compassion for man. Compassion is an emotion. It is aroused in someone who sees another in need. That God is compassionate is clearly shown in such verses as 2 Corinthians 1:3 and Luke 6:36:

2 Corinthians 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."

The word translated "mercies" is an unfortunate translation. It is the word "oiktirmos" and does not mean mercy. It means compassion. God is the Father of compassions.

Luke 6:36 says: "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful."

Once again, the word translated *mercy* twice in this verse is not the regular word for mercy and again it is better translated "compassion." God the Father is a God of compassion. It is this compassion that causes or ignites action, and that action is "love." Agapee love is an action word, not a feeling word. When one does what compassion desires one to do love determines if what one wants to do is right. If it is and it is done, that is love. But what one does has to be the right thing to do, or it is not love. When a child needs to be disciplined and we don't because we love them soooo much, that is not love because it is not right. True love does right. 1 Corinthians 13 says that love rejoices in the truth.

Out of our misunderstanding of words like this we have our present "unconditional love" teaching. That this teaching is not right should be clear to us from such statements as this one made by the Lord Himself: "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated." How could He hate him if He loved him unconditionally?

III. THE WORLD

We consider next the word *world*. What is meant by this word? Well, it refers to all of lost mankind. God is no respecter of persons. He sent Christ to die for all of mankind. It is strange that it should be necessary to say something about this but it may come as a shock to some that most Calvinists have great trouble with this word world. In their view God only loved the elect and He sent Christ to die for the elect. The elect are those few God chose in eternity past. He reprobated the rest of mankind so how could He love those He reprobated? He couldn't and didn't. But now they have the word world to contend with.

Let me read you one Calvinistic answer to John 3:16. It says:

"The phrase, 'the world,' in [John 3:16](#) must be understood in the context of both [John 3:16](#) and the rest of the Bible. Even in [John 3:16](#), we see that only "whoever believes" will receive eternal life. So, it is entirely possible that John equating "the world" with "whoever believes," in which case John would be saying something along the lines of, "For God so loved people from all over the world who believe in Christ.."

<https://reformedwiki.com/calvinism-john-316-world>

I don't suppose that for any logical person it is necessary to comment. That is heresy.

V. THAT

We go then to the next to the word, "that."

16 *"For God so loved the world **that** He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

The original word translated "that" is *hoste*. It has been translated "so that" 17 times; "insomuch that" 16 times, "therefore" 9 times and a few other ways. The online bible suggests it can be translated, "so that, insomuch that, so then, therefore, and wherefore."

We could now translate verse 16 like this:

16 *"For in this way God loved the world, therefore He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

We could now translated John 3:16 like this: "For in this way God sought the welfare of the world, therefore He gave His only begotten Son..."

VI. WHOSOEVER

The next word in John 3:16 is "whosoever." When we traveled this summer my wife and I listened to D.M. Lloyd Jones on Romans 8:28-29. His Calvinism does not show up very often but I wanted to know what he really believed. The two messages we listened to were so uncharacteristic of Jones I could hardly believe it was the same man. A Calvinist has blinders that keep him from seeing broadly when it comes to the five points.

Here is the good news. God sent His Son to die for every lost person. And "whosoever," that is anyone who believes will be saved. And let me add this, anyone can believe. The information of the Gospel is so clear and has such a solid foundation that only pride and a desire to live in sin will keep one from believing the Gospel.

VI. BELIEVES

The next word in our passage is "believes." What one believes determines how one lives. That is why God chose that the just shall live by faith.

Let me show first what believing does not mean. It does not mean that if I believe there is a God I will be saved. It does not mean that if I believe that the God of the Bible is the only God I will be saved. It does not mean that if I believe Jesus was a real Person on earth at one time and that He is also divine that I will be saved. It does not mean if I believe the Bible is the Word of God I will be saved.

If I truly believe that means I know I am a sinner and lost and I am on the way to hell. There was no need for Christ to die if that is not true. Then it means I believe that Jesus died in my place. He took my place in death. Then it means I put my trust in what He has done for me. It means I believe that if I confess my sins, He is faithful and just to forgive my sins and so I do that. Then it means I want to be freed from my sin and I believe that if I repent, He forgives me and by faith I can learn to come free from sin. It means that when I have repented, I believe I am free from those sins I have repented of. It means I trust Him day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year.

It means to live by faith. Our English word "to believe" and our word "faith" both have the same root word in the NT. The word "faith" is "pistis." And the word "to believe" is "pistews." One's faith is what one believes. It means I am persuaded that what I believe is the truth. It means that if I sin and come to recognize it as sin I repent and turn from my wicked way.

The word "to believe" as in believing in Christ is almost always in the present tense. It means I go on believing. If I go on sinning, I am not believing. It is that simple.

Look at the following context now. We'll read verses 17-22:

17 *"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*

18 *"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

19 *"And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

20 *"For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*

21 *"But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."*

God did not send Jesus to come and condemn man. He sent Him to save man. Now note verse 18:

18 *"He who believes (present tense, goes on believing) in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe (present tense, that is he who does not go on believing) is condemned already, because he has not believed (perfect tense. He has not believed with abiding results) in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

You see, someone who does not go on believing is condemned. Why? He did not believe with abiding results. He is a covenant breaker. He has broken his agreement and God's sacrifice no longer counts for him. Look at verse 36:

36 *"He who believes (present tense, that is goes on believing) in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."*

When it says, "he who does not believe" it does not mean he who never believed. It is also a present tense and means he who has believed but does not go on believing shall not see life. The wrath of God abides on him. So much for unconditional love.

Life is very, very serious. Commitment to Jesus Christ is very, very serious. A part time belief leads to condemnation.

VII. SHOULD NOT PERISH

So, what is the benefit of this believing? Here are the next words: it is that they should not perish. To perish is to be cast into hell and let me assure you there is a hell and all unbelievers, whether they never believed or only believed for a time, will perish. To perish is not to cease

to exist. It is to enter an existence that is forever different from that for which one was made. I have used this illustration. When you have a beautiful vase and you it crashes to the cement floor it perishes. Oh, it still exists but it no longer exists for that for which it was made. So it is with all unbelievers.

You see, John 3:16 does not say that he who has once believed will not perish. It is he who continually believes that will not perish.

VIII. BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE

Let us go the last part of this verse and that is that the one who goes on believing has everlasting life. Well, you may say, that is simple. The one who goes on believing will live forever. That is true. Jesus said that He who lives and believes in Him shall never die. But that is not what the phrase "everlasting life" means.

I have mentioned those who hold to the doctrine of once saved always saved. They say, "Well, if the believer has everlasting life, and then forsakes the Lord and they are lost, how can you say they had everlasting life. That is some poor kind of everlasting life."

The original wording is *aionios zwee*. The Greek Scholar, Boyce W. Blackwelder says, "The NT connotation of eternal life is not primarily that of endless of existence. The expression refers basically to the quality of life. In John 17:3 Jesus says, 'And this is life eternal, that they might know...thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.'"

Eternal life is knowing God. We don't have an English adjective to translate the word gives as 'eternal' in this phrase. If I made one it would be 'ageous life.' It comes from a word meaning an age, and so it is ageous life. That is, it is the life of the age to come. Most certainly the life of the age to come is endless, but that is not what this phrase means.

The moment a person truly repents of his or her sins and they fully put their trust in Jesus Christ, that moment they receive this life. If they go on believing, after they die they will go to heaven. If they are raptured they will go to heaven. And 7 years later they will come back down to

earth and enter the age to come with ageous life. They will never sin again and they will never die again because they have the God kind of life.

CONCL: So, we conclude. Several modern doctrines have released sinners from the fear of God, as I see it. The teachings of unconditional love, unconditional grace, unconditional eternal security and unconditional forgiveness have brought a deadness in people which causes them to not experience conviction when sin is taught. Today many believe we have a God who loves us soooo much that there is no possible way that such a loving God could cast people into hell.

Let me remind us of some biblical truths. God said, "Jacob have I loved but Esau I have hated." Jesus said few would be saved. In Noah's day, few were saved. That was eight people out of millions. Do the math. That is what few means.

Let me further remind us that God is just. His justice requires that He send all unredeemed mankind to hell. God is holy. He cannot take sin to heaven. God is righteous. His love requires that whatever He does is right. It is not right to overlook sin and God won't. God's attributes of holiness, righteousness and justice are not against His attribute of love, nor is love against those attributes.

Let me remind us of another truth. Jesus Christ said that many professing Christians would go to hell. Let me read for you what He said in Matthew 7:21-23:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

22 "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?

23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

What did these people think? They thought they were Christians. They thought their life proved it. But the Lord said, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

Then let me remind us of this: God is a God of compassion. Compassion is an emotion. He feels for man's lost condition and in this way His love responded to His compassion: He gave His

only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. That invitation stands wide open to all of lost mankind, but believing means more than giving mental assent to truth. If one truly continues to believe one will without doubt be saved.