

“For in This Way God Loved...”

John 3:16

26 February 2017 — New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia
Pastor Trent Eastman

Introduction

John 3:16 is one of the great jewels of Scripture. It is the verse most people memorize first. It is often the first verse translated when missionaries begin work in a new language. It is recited at baptisms, hung on walls, and stitched into the fabric of Christian memory. It is the verse that summarizes the great truths of our faith.

There is a well-known story about Karl Barth — one of the most formidable theological minds of the twentieth century — being asked to summarize the entire body of his life’s work. After a long career of writing and teaching, he reportedly said something like this: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.* John 3:16 is where the Bible tells you so.

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

This single verse contains a remarkable concentration of theological themes. What is eternal life? What does it mean to perish? What does it mean to believe? How are we to understand the phrase *only begotten Son*? What does it reveal about who God is? And what does it mean when it says *the world*? These are all important questions, and we will touch on all of them. But the key word — the beginning of this verse, really — is love.

Literally, in the Greek, this verse reads: *For in this manner — loved — the God, the world.* Word order in Greek carries emphasis, and the emphasis here falls upon the action of God. Love. *For in this way God loves.*

This morning I want to focus on that love — the remarkable, life-giving, enduring love of God. In doing so, we are doing exactly what the Apostle Paul instructs us to do. He writes:

“...I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17–19 NIV)

Paul prays that we would grasp the greatness of God's love. That is my prayer this morning as well.

Four Qualities of God's Love

In John 3:16, four qualities of God's love emerge from the text. I want to walk through this verse looking at each one, and as I do, I want to hold them up against the way the world loves — because God's love is radically different from the love this world knows. This is precisely why Paul prays that we would have the power to *grasp* it. It does not come naturally to us. So let us begin.

I. God's Love Is Great

“For God so loved the world...”

The love of this world is limited and shallow. People tend to love only those who are meaningful to them — friends, family. That circle might extend outward a bit, perhaps to those from the same town, the same school, the same racial group, the same nation, maybe those who share the same beliefs and ideas. But the world is full of criminals, bullies, tyrants, people who have done genuinely terrible things.

And this is what God does — *he loved the world*.

Let me offer a simple test. Take just four of the Ten Commandments. You shall not lie — and if you tell me you have never lied, you are a liar. You shall not steal — have you ever taken something that was not yours? A paper clip, a pen, someone's time? You shall not commit adultery — but Jesus said that if you have looked at another person with lust, you have already committed adultery in your heart. You shall not murder — and you may never have taken a life, but Jesus says that if you have harbored hatred toward someone, you have already murdered them in your heart.

Our world is filled with liars, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. I am not singling anyone out. I include myself. That is exactly the point. This is why God's love is so great. He does not love a select group, a particular nation, a tribe of people, or a certain type of person. He loves *the world*. His love is great — unlimited, boundless, abundant.

II. God's Love Is Generous

"...that He gave His only begotten Son..."

The love we know in this world is stingy. It calculates out of abundance — *How much do I have? How much can I afford to give? How much can I part with before I actually feel it?* It calculates return — *If I love, what do I get back?* And the world's stingy love also operates in fear. *If I am too generous, I will be taken advantage of. I need to hold something back in case I have a need later.*

So the world gives only out of excess. Only from what it can spare.

But God's love is not like that. He gave his one and only Son.

A brief note on the translation: the King James Version renders this word *only begotten*, staying close to the Greek. Other translations, like the ESV, say *one and only Son*, omitting the word *begotten* because it can suggest that the Son was created by the Father — brought into being at some point in time. But the Greek word here, in this context, carries another meaning: *of the same essence, of the same being*. Jesus is not a creation. He is uncreated. He is fully God. This matters enormously for understanding the generosity of what God has done.

It would be easy to think — God is all-powerful, all things belong to him, his resources are infinite, so of course he can afford to be generous. But that misses the point entirely. When Scripture says that God gave his only begotten Son, it is saying that God gave *himself*. He did not give from an overflowing bank account. He gave the bank. He gave you himself.

It is this generous love that caused the God who made the universe — who spread out the expanse of space and hung the stars in the sky — to be born of a woman, laid in a manger, raised in some forgettable small town. Why? Because of love.

And it is this same generous love that carried Jesus through everything that followed. When dear friends betrayed him, he endured. When people called him a hypocrite, he endured. When the leaders accused him of sin, even of having a demon. When people spat on him, when soldiers beat him, when they finally nailed him to a cross. How did he endure all of it? By love. A love that is both great and generous — and offered freely to you.

III. God's Love Is Welcoming

"...that whoever believes in him..."

The love of this world is conditional and materialistic. People love whatever is beautiful, whatever is attractive, whatever is useful, whatever is going to make them happy. This kind of love creates idols.

The world loves *things* — houses and cars and trophies and titles. The world loves *those* — the rich, the famous, the beautiful. It is not hard to find examples. The world loves the *whatevers*: whatever is wealthy, whatever is attractive, whatever benefits me, whatever fits my categories of acceptable.

Whatever.

But notice what Scripture says: *that whoever believes in him*. Not *whatever* — *whoever*. That is an invitation to everyone. Your name is included in the *whoeveres*. God welcomes you. God welcomes whoever.

I love the way Max Lucado puts it: “We lose much in life — sobriety, solvency, our sanity. We lose jobs and careers. We lose at love, we lose youth with all its vigor and ideals. We lose much. But we never lose our place on God’s *whoever* list.”

Whoever believes. God’s love welcomes all people.

IV. God’s Love Endures

“...shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

The love of this world is always changing, because it is tied to feelings and emotions — both of which shift over time. People fall in love. People fall out of love. People come together and they break apart. These are the marks of love built on feeling.

But God’s love is different. It endures. It lasts. It does not change. And the reason it does not change is that it is not based on a feeling — it is grounded in God’s own being, in his nature and his immutable character. His love endures because *he* endures. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and so is his love.

In a few weeks, a group of us will be traveling to Greece. One of the things the ancient Greeks longed for was to be remembered — to endure, to not be forgotten. This is part of why they built in marble, why they carved their names in stone. And yet here we are, twenty-five hundred years later. We will walk among the pillars and not know the names of those who built them. Very few of the people who ever walked this earth are truly remembered.

Think about your own family. How far back can you trace your own ancestors by name? Can you name your great-grandparents? Your great-great-grandparents? Probably not. Nothing lasts

in this world. Even those things carved in stone and set upright in a cemetery will eventually disappear, worn smooth by time and weather, and be forgotten.

But God's love endures. It lasts. It is part of who he is — and therefore, that which he loves also endures. This is why his love leads to eternal life. An enduring love does not let go.

We get a glimpse of this throughout the Gospels. Have you ever noticed that at every funeral Jesus attends, the dead person does not stay dead? Every single time, they get up.

He comes to the home of Jairus, a synagogue leader. By the time he arrives, it is the day of the funeral. People are wailing, and he says to the little girl: *Get up*. She gets up.

He comes upon a funeral procession carrying out the dead son of a widow. He says to the mother, *Don't cry*. And to the son: *Young man, I say to you, get up*. The boy sits up.

And then there is Lazarus — Jesus arrives not at the time of death, not even on the day of the funeral, but four days later. Lazarus is already in the tomb. And still, Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away, and then calls into the darkness: *Lazarus, come out*.

God's power is so great that those he loves never leave his grasp. Death cannot pry them away. His love truly endures. Paul declares this in Romans 8:

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38–39 ESV)

This is why Jesus says that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Invitation

This morning I want to invite you into God's great, generous, welcoming, and enduring love. It is the love our hearts were made for.

The way this world loves is limited, shallow, stingy, materialistic, and constantly changing. This is why the world's love is so damaging to people. Afraid of losing love, we put enormous pressure on ourselves. *I must be a certain way. I must make myself loveable. I must meet those expectations — or else I will be left. I will be unloved.* And unfortunately, we take this distorted understanding of love and apply it to God — thinking that in order for God to love me, I have to be good enough, moral enough, faithful enough, that I have to meet some standard before he will accept me. That is how the world thinks. That is not what this passage says.

Believing in Christ is not something you must do *in order for* God to love you. He loves you right now. Paul writes: “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8) God’s love for you is not contingent on your response to it. But believing in him — trusting in the work and person of Jesus Christ — is how you *receive* that love. It is how you let him love you. It is how you experience love that is great, and generous, and welcoming, and enduring.

I had a friend in college who was deeply in love with a young woman. He pursued her, spent time with her, loved her with real intention. One day he asked her to marry him. After several weeks of deliberation, she said no. My friend was crushed. All that love he had for her — it did not disappear, at least not right away — but he simply could not give it to her, because she had said no. A relationship that might have flourished instead perished.

This is what it means to receive him. God is asking you to enter into a covenant with him — not to *earn* his love, but *because of* his love. And it is in that covenantal relationship that his love is fully poured out upon you.

Will you receive him? Will you let God love you?