

John 3:16 “The Greatest Verse about the Greatest Gift Ever Given”^{**1}

Main Idea: This morning we're going to unwrap the greatest gift ever given. It's packaged in perhaps the greatest verse ever written, John 3:16. As we unpack John 3:16 we discover two things.

I. We learn about the Giver.

A. He is *the* God.

Key: The greatest gift came from the greatest being in the universe.

B. He is a *loving* God.

1. True love takes the initiative.
2. True love exhibits grace.

C. He is a *generous* God.

1. The Father gave a love gift to His Son.
2. The Son gave Himself to redeem the love gift for the Father.

II. We learn about the Gift.

A. Like all gifts, it must be received.

1. To do so, we must believe.
2. We must believe *in Him*.

B. Unlike any other gift, it will last forever.

1. We will not perish.
2. We will enjoy life that never ends.

Response: Two appropriate responses in light of this gift...

1. Worship the Giver.
2. Share the gift with others.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

A drop of water. How many times have you seen a drop of water? So many times that if I told you we were going to look at a drop of water, you'd probably respond, "You've got to be kidding me! I've seen that a thousand times. There's nothing left to see!"

But have you really? I remember seventh grade science class, when for the first time in my life I looked at a drop of water through a microscope. I could barely believe my eyes. I never dreamed it was all there, right before my eyes, a new world of amebas and parameciums and a host of wonderful, mysterious creatures. Oh, I'd seen a drop of water before, but I'd never seen this before!

That's sort of how I feel as I introduce today's sermon. This morning I want to show you something familiar in order to help you see something that's beautiful beyond description. It's not a drop of water. It's John 3:16.

This Christmas morning, we're going to unwrap what I think—and by the time we're done, what I hope you'll agree—is the greatest gift ever given. It's packaged in perhaps the greatest verse ever written, John 3:16. You know it...

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Those twenty-six words (twenty-five in the Greek text) comprise what is perhaps the most amazing sentence ever placed on a printed page. It's not surprising that this verse is probably the most recognized verse in the Bible, in fact, one of the few that you'll see at an NFL game.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message seeks to take a fresh look at a familiar text. It's based on sermons delivered at WBC on 12/19/99 and 11/29/09.

So a lot of people are quite familiar with this verse. But I also believe, as with a drop of water, that there's much more to be seen, if we'll have eyes to see.

I don't know of any other verse in the Bible that can help us appreciate the significance of Christmas more than this verse. This is holy, sacred ground, the inspired record of the greatest gift ever given.

Let's take a close look at it, word by word, every word breathed out by the Spirit of God for our eternal benefit. As we unpack John 3:16 we'll discover two things about the greatest gift ever given.

I. We learn about the Giver.

Who gave the greatest gift ever given? The answer is, God did. For *God* so loved the world that He gave. But wait. Who is this God who gave this gift? We learn three things about Him in this verse.

A. He is *the* God. In the Greek text there's actually an article in the phrase that reads, "For *the* God so loved the world that He gave." Who is *the* God?

The person who wrote this fourth biographical account of the life of Jesus was the apostle John. He penned this gospel around 85 to 90 A.D., some sixty years after the Lord returned to heaven.

We live in a day of pluralism and tolerance, with many gods and many faiths. All are acceptable, so we're told. Except for the one that claims to be the *only* way to heaven.

Which is precisely what Jesus claimed. *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.*

John faced similar pressures in his day. The Romans had gods, *many* gods, in fact. Furthermore, there were others on the planet in the first century who had gods--like the barbarian groups in Europe, and the Asian people groups to the East. They all had their gods.

So which God gave the greatest gift ever given? *The* God did. Just who is *the* God? According to John's record, He is the eternal One who has an eternal Son and He sent His Son into the world.

Let this sink in. *The greatest gift came from the greatest being in the universe.*

And be assured that when the eternal Son came to the world, He certainly didn't teach pluralism. He taught that there is *one* true God--as John is careful to point out in this gospel. The true God is the One who existed in the beginning before time began (1:1). The true God is the Creator, the One who made all things (1:3) and is the source of life (1:4). Ultimately, the true God is the One who revealed Himself in the Person of the God-Man, Jesus the Christ (1:14).

The Giver of the greatest gift ever given is *the* God. Here's a second characteristic...

B. He is a *loving* God. "For God so *loved* the world."

The verse begins with a word that beckons us to look back at the immediate context. "For." *For* God so loved the world. John 3:16 is tucked away in the significant third chapter which records a most intriguing account.

In verse 1 we're told that a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus came to see Jesus one night. Why at night? Apparently he was intrigued by the Master Teacher but did not want his peers to know so.

He said to Jesus in verse 2, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come *from God*." Nicodemus could tell there was something special about Jesus. How? He continues (2b), "For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if *God* were not with him."

Perhaps he expected a polite "thank you" for his compliment, but that's not what Jesus gave him. Rather Jesus told Nicodemus in verse 3, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

That flabbergasted the Pharisee. So he asked (4), "How can a man be born when he is old?"

Jesus explained in verses 5-8 that He was talking about a supernatural birth. Being good won't cut it. Being religious won't either. To enter God's kingdom a person must be born again, and to be born again a person must experience the regenerating work of the Sovereign Spirit of God.

Which prompted Nicodemus to ask a followup question in verse 9, "How can this be?" To which Jesus replied, in essence (10-12), "Nicodemus, you're a leading teacher of the chosen people of God, and you don't understand what I'm saying? I'm telling you things you ought to know since you have the Word of God."

Then Jesus spoke very pointedly about His unique identity in verse 13, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man."

Nicodemus had admitted that God was *with* Jesus, but now Jesus tells him that He's been *with* God. Indeed, He has come *from* God.

But why? Why did He come from God? In verses 14-15 Jesus makes an amazing prediction, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. Stop there for a moment. That's a reference to an event recorded in Exodus 21:8, where God sent a plague of snakes to judge His sinful people. In His mercy, God told Moses to construct a snake on a pole, so that whoever looked at the pole would not die but live.

Jesus used that illustration to explain what was going to happen to Him. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up [a reference to His death on the Cross], that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

There's why I've come, Nicodemus. The Son of Man--that's Me--is going to be lifted up. He's going to die the terrible death of crucifixion so that others may live *eternally*.

Yet why? Why would the Son of Man purposely choose a course that would take Him to such a horrible death, not to mention why would He come into this sin-ridden world in the first place?

There's only one answer. *Love*. The God who gave the greatest gift ever given did so because He is a *loving* God. "For God so loved the world."

The very words indicate two marvelous insights into true love. First...

1. *True love takes the initiative*. "For God *so* loved the world." "So" is an adverb. It could refer to the extent of His love, but I think it indicates *how* God demonstrated His love. He did it "in this manner." For God *so*, that is, in this manner loved the world.

How did He do it? In the Greek language there are several words for "love," but the one used here is *agapao* (in the noun form, *agape*). God *loved* the world. He didn't merely have feelings for the world. Nor was it mere compassion and sympathy. It was a love that led to action.

Agape love is a sacrificial love. It involves giving. It requires selfless, sacrificial activity for the good of the recipient. And its activity that costs. In this case God put His love on display by giving what was most dear to Him, as we'll soon see.

Please realize that it is God that loves first. Our text indicates that God took the initiative to act on man's behalf. For *God* so loved the world.

He had to take the initiative. The world wouldn't, indeed *couldn't*. The Bible describes human beings as being *dead* in their sins (Rom. 3:23). How much can a dead person do to alter his condition? Not one thing. Dead men can do nothing.

So it had to be God. And it was! The theme of sovereign love fills the Scriptures.

"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8)."

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10)."

My friends, if it were not for God's initiative in loving us, we would remain dead in our sins, forever cut off from Him. But God took the initiative. And why? Because that's His nature. He is a *loving* God. And that's what true love always does. It doesn't wait. It initiates.

2. *True love exhibits grace.* "For God so loved *the world*." Think of how that sounded to Nicodemus.² Who again was Nicodemus? A devout, religious Jew. A leading teacher of the Jews. A Pharisee.

Suppose you had asked Nicodemus this question, "Who does God love?" How would he have responded? The typical first century Jew believed that God loved His chosen people Israel. But love the world? No way.

William Barclay helps us grasp the common Jewish mindset, as he writes, "The Jew had a immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations he had made...It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world...If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death."³

There was even a barricade around the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Non-Jews were allowed to look at the temple, but could not approach it. A sign on the wall read, "Trespassers will be executed."⁴

In stark contrast ponder these words, "For God so loved the *world*." Not just people *like us*, but all the peoples of the world.

And if that's true, then Jesus is not merely one of many options. He is God's provision for the *world*. Revelation 5:9 says there will be people in heaven "from every

²It's possible that these words were not part of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, but were inserted by the apostle John at a later date. There were no "red letters" in the original text to distinguish Jesus' words from the rest of the biblical text, so it is difficult to determine where Jesus' answer to Nicodemus ends. If John inserted this paragraph at a later date, he did so to emphasize that Jesus is not merely God's love gift for the *Jews*, but for the whole *world*.

³William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 125.

⁴John Stott, *Ephesians*, pp. 91-2.

tribe and language and people and nation." God's love crosses ethnic barriers. The greatest gift ever given is for *all* people groups.

Ever heard of the Tebbu people? There are only 25,000 of them in the world, and if you're using the Joshua Project's prayer guide, you prayed for this people group on Thursday.

The Tebbu people live in one of the most dramatically remote regions of China. They are largely cut off from the rest of the world by their surroundings. The Tebbu homeland is to this day dangerous for visitors, and the people wild and unpredictable. Although almost all Tebbu people profess Tibetan Buddhism, shamanist and animist rituals undergird all of their religious practices.

The remoteness of the Tebbu people has long been a barrier to the Gospel of Christ.

Much prayer is needed to prepare the hearts of the Tebbu to desire to hear of Christ. Pray for hungry and receptive hearts.

There is evidence of only one Tebbu follower of Christ today.⁵

For God so loved the Tebbu people. And the Ansari in India. And the Betawi in Indonesia. And the Fulani in Nigeria. And every other of the 16,300 unique people groups of the world, for whom He gave this gift.

But does John 3:16 teach universalism, that since God loves all He will save all? No, for the last verse of this chapter (36) makes it clear that those who reject the Son remain under the wrath of God.

So why is it so easy for us to take the love of God for granted? How can we yawn when we hear the words, "God loves you."? I think the answer, at least in part, is that we read, "For God so loved the world," and think, "Well, that's nice, but why shouldn't He love us? We're basically nice people, aren't we?"

I remember the time I shared the gospel with a friend and explained that He needed Jesus, for he was a sinner. And it offended him. He said, "You make it sound like I'm a *bad* person." And he wanted to change the subject.

This is our condition. We'd like to think we have something to offer to God that could merit His favor. We proudly think we deserve, at least in part, His love. But do we?

The truth is, God gives us a picture of what He thinks of us. Gomer. Do you remember her? She was the wife of the prophet Hosea. Hosea loved her, but Gomer betrayed his love. She became a prostitute and wasted away her life with reckless living.

But even in her absence, Hosea kept loving her. He even sent gifts to her, but her brazen heart refused to melt. And then the day came when she stood on the slave block, reaping what she had sown. Hosea came to the slave sale and saw her standing there. Do you remember what he did? He bought her back. He paid fifteen shekels of silver and some barley for the one he loved.

He bought her back. And that's what God did for us, too.

Someone put it this way, "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If

⁵ joshuaproject.net

our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."

You see, the Person who gave the greatest gift ever given is *the* God. He's also a *loving* God. But there's more. According to John 3:16...

C. He is a generous God. How generous? "For God so loved the world *that He gave His one and only Son.*"

Again, consider these words carefully. How generous is God? So generous that He *gave*. He took action. Uninfluenced by anyone, He chose to do the unimaginable. He chose to give. To say that it was a costly gift is a great understatement.

What did He give? His *one and only Son*, or as the KJV puts it, His *only begotten Son*. In the Greek text the very order of the words puts emphasis on the cost involved in this gift: "For God so loved the world that the Son, the Only begotten One, He gave."

One day long before this God tested a man named Abraham. He said to him (Gen 22:2), "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Abraham heard those words, "Take your son, your *only son*, and sacrifice him," and Abraham obeyed God and raised the knife. But God intervened and provided a ram so Abraham didn't have to sacrifice his own son.

There was no ram in the thicket for God. God the Father gave His only Son.

Some religious groups try to minimize this gift by saying that the Son was merely a created being and not eternal. That, my friend, is one of Satan's most devious tactics, to confuse people into thinking that the gift was less than it actually was.

Know this. The Son the Father gave is equal to the Father (10:20). This Son was with God in the beginning (1:2). This Son was and is God (1:1). This Son is the exact representation of God (1:18). Jesus said that to see the Son is to see the Father (14:9). The Son is the only way to the Father (14:6). The Son is the One who does the Father's work (17:4). The Son had glory in the presence of the Father before the world began (17:5).

But it's not just the cults who confuse the issue. Many people read John 3:16 and sort of picture a frustrated God in heaven who loves the world, yet seems perplexed by man's refusal to respond to His love. There He sits on His throne, wringing His hands and saying, "World, I love you so much! Why won't you respond to Me? I gave you My Son. What more can I do?"

This is not the picture of God in the Bible, and certainly not in John's gospel. As we read John's gospel we discover that this amazing gift is linked to two other amazing demonstrations of the generous nature of God. The first took place before time began. That's when...

1. The Father gave a love gift to His Son. God the Father decided to show His great love for His Son. True love always gives, right? So the Father demonstrated His love for His Son, the One with whom He'd enjoyed eternal fellowship. The Father designed and decreed a plan to provide a people for His Son, a people who would praise the infinite worth of His Son forever and ever, a people that God would rescue from their sins by His grace for the glory of His Son.

You say, "Can you show me verses that talk about the Father giving a love gift to His Son?" Yes, indeed. The gospel of John is full of them.

John 6:37, "All that the *Father gives me* will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." Jesus said that His Father gave a people to Him, and that they will *all* come to Him. Continue reading Jesus' words...

John 6:38-39, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that *he has given me*, but raise them up at the last day." The Son will take care of the love gift the Father has given Him.

But just who is this love gift? Jesus calls them His "sheep" in John 10:27-29, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, *who has given them to me*, is greater than all; no one can snatch *them* [i.e. the sheep, the love gift] out of my Father's hand."

From eternity past God the Father chose to give a people to His Son. He knew who they would be before He ever created them. In His grace He purposed to save them from their sins, so that throughout eternity they might praise the Son.

The Father loves the Son, and He proved it by giving a love gift to Him.

What about the Son? Does the Son love the Father? Indeed. And how did the Son demonstrate His generous love for the Father? Here's how...

2. *The Son gave Himself to redeem the love gift for the Father.* That's the second amazing demonstration of the generous nature of God in John's gospel. In eternity past, the Father gave His Son a love gift. In the fullness of time, the Son entered this world and gave Himself to redeem the gift the Father had given Him.

Here's what Jesus said in John 10:14-17, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life *for the sheep*. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again."

The Son came to rescue the sheep, the Father's love gift, at the expense of His own life. The Son cherishes the love gift. Why? It's not because the love gift itself is intrinsically valuable. It's because His Father gave it to Him.

Do you know what was on Jesus' mind the night before He was crucified? The Father's love gift was. Here's the record of what Jesus prayed that night in John 17:2-3, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to *all those you have given him*."

Who did Jesus say will receive eternal life? The Father's love gift will--all the people that the Father gave to the Son.⁶

Throughout His prayer Jesus kept referring to the Father's love gift. Verse 6, "I have revealed you *to those whom you gave me* out of the world. They were yours; you *gave them to me* and they have obeyed your word." Verse 9, "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for *those you have given me*, for they are yours." Verse 24, "Father, I

⁶In fact in John 10:26 Jesus said this to those unbelieving Jews, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep."

want *those you have given me* to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."

Dear friends, this is what makes the greatest gift ever given so great. It's because of the greatness of the *Giver*. "For *God* so loved the world."

God, *the* God, the God who is *loving* and *generous*, is the One who gave this gift. It was the Father who gave a love gift to His Son, and the Son who entered this world as a human being so that He might grow up and redeem the love gift for the Father.

And all this leads to a question. What are we supposed to do with this gift? John 3:16 tells us, so let's keep unwrapping. First, we learn about the Giver, but secondly...

II. We learn about the Gift.

What's true of this very special gift? Two things...

A. Like all gifts, it must be received. Even a child understands this, perhaps *especially* a child. He sees a package under the Christmas tree and when he sees his name on it, he knows that someone is giving him a gift. It's intended for him.

And he knows that to enjoy the gift, he must *receive* it and open it up.

God's love gift is no different. It must be received.

But how do we do that with God's gift? John 3:16 tells us how.

1. *To do so, we must believe.* "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, *that whoever believes.*"

Whoever--God offers His gift to everyone. To every people group. To every person in the world. He offers this gift to all. But only those who *believe* will enjoy the gift.

To receive this gift we must *believe*. Trust. Have faith. The verb is present tense--literally "whoever is believing." Saving faith is not, "Oh, I believed once but I don't anymore." No, it's an ongoing belief. Indeed, one of the key words the Bible uses to identify Christians is "believers."

Which raises the question. Believe *what*? John 3:16 gives us the answer...

2. *We must believe in Him.* Faith is only as good as its object. Those who receive the gift are those who believe *in Jesus Christ*.

The Father sent His Son to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. The Son lived a perfect life. He died as a sacrificial lamb. He paid the penalty for the sins of all who would believe on Him. And then He conquered death.

You either believe in that person, or you don't. In reality there are only two options. Either you believe in Jesus Christ, or you believe in something else.

May I ask you a very serious question? What are you believing in, what are you trusting in to get you to heaven?

The problem is, too often we are fuzzy at this point. One person says, "I've made peace with God." That's not the point. This is. Has He made peace with you? Another says, "I'm okay with God." But the issue is, are you sure He's okay with you? There's only one way for a sinner to be right with God. It's through the gift, *Jesus Christ*. And this gift, like all gifts, must be *received*.

Have you received the gift?

There's something very unique about this gift...

B. Unlike any other gift, it will last forever. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him *shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Most gifts wear out, or rust out, or get lost. But not this gift.

What's true of us if we have received this gift? Two things. Here's the first...

1. *We will not perish.* The Bible teaches that the penalty of sin is death. A holy God must exhibit wrath towards those who defy Him.

The world lives as though there is no hell. But hell is a real place, and the final verse of this chapter declares the sobering reality, "Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

A person who does not believe in Jesus Christ will *perish*. That doesn't mean to be annihilated, but rather to be condemned. To perish is to be banished from the presence of God and suffer in that state forever and ever.

That's what we all deserve as sinners. But that's not what we receive if we have believed in Christ. We will not perish. Instead...

2. *We will enjoy life that never ends.* We will "*have eternal life.*" Eternal life is life that has no end, yes, but much more than that. *Eternal* life speaks not only of quantity but of quality. It's what Adam forfeited when he was barred from the garden. Life that is really life!

Most of us are so prone to live for the here and now, as though what we *see* is what we *get*. It's not. This life is a vapor, but the life to come is eternal.

My friend, it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. It doesn't matter how bad you've blown it in the past. You can be right with God today and live with Him forever. Why? Because He gave a gift.

A mother wanted to teach her daughter a lesson. She gave her little girl a quarter and a dollar for church. She told the girl, "Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself." When they were coming out of church the mother asked the daughter which amount she had given. "Well," said the little girl, "I was going to give the dollar, but just before the collection the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did."⁷

Aren't you glad that God is not like us? I am. He gave His best. He gave the greatest gift ever given. And His gift demands a response from us.

Response: Two appropriate responses in light of this gift...

The greatest gift ever given compels us to do two things.

1. *Worship the Giver.* For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. Listen. The God who gave His Son for us deserves our *worship*. He deserves for us to stop living for ourselves, and submit our lives to Him. If we refuse to do so we will perish forever. But if we believe in His Son, He gives us eternal life.

How have you responded to the greatest gift ever given? I invite you to worship the Giver today. But don't stop there. Secondly...

2. *Share the gift with others.* This is our privilege, to let the world know about the most amazing gift ever given. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

⁷from *Bits and Pieces*, February 4, 1993, p. 23.