

Love

John 3:16

Introduction

Gift Giving: How do you feel about buying gifts for people at Christmas? I like giving gifts but it can be a little bit stressful.

- My 10-year-old sent an email to me and his mom and two of his grandparents with specific items he wanted us to buy him (just trying to help 😊). He also sent a follow-up that said, "Let me know what you got my siblings so I can plan accordingly" (it was like receiving an e-mail from a general manager).
- Some people are hard to buy for because they won't tell you what they want (*cough* Whitney) or they already buy what they want (👉).

When you buy a gift you are trying to communicate something to someone about how much you care for them. There's this simple formula that is hard to navigate.

- How much money am I willing to spend on this person?
- How much money do I have to give?
 - I promise that my \$100 means more as a gift than Jeff Bezos'. I could use the \$100, he couldn't. The same dollar amount does not have the same value to different people (e.g., "give until it hurts"). A sacrifice is not a sacrifice if it doesn't cost you anything.
 - "A" vs. "C" in seminary. One person's "C" is more valuable than another person's "A".
 - Widow's mite (a fraction of a day's wage) vs. "large sums" of "rich people" (Mk 12:41-44). They gave out of abundance, she gave out of poverty (everything she had).
- I tell couples this when I perform their wedding ceremony: "When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person? How much of your freedom are you willing to forsake? How much of your precious time, emotion, and resources are you willing to invest in this person?"

The depth of God's love is revealed by the value of his sacrifice.

Most Famous Verse: John 3:16 is (historically) the most famous verse in the Bible (though that might have changed in recent years). It has a history of being held up on signs at sporting events (3:16 was enough info for people to know what you're talking about). It has been applauded by some and mocked by others (Austin 3:16).

- **Familiarity:** "Familiarity breeds contempt" (Aesop). "Though familiarity may not breed contempt, it takes off the edge of admiration" (William Hazlitt). "Familiarity is a magician that is cruel to beauty" (Ouida). Familiarity is a terrible substitute for passion, wonder, amazement, and genuine faith.
- **Assumption:** We assume people know it. I was watching football the other night (American, of course; Football, association = soccer). It was a terrible game. I won't mention the teams for fear of offending (though honesty should be offensive). As I was

watching penalty after penalty and one botched play after another, the announcer said: "What this team needs is to get back to the fundamentals." Isn't that so true in all things?

- I need the fundamental truth of God's Word; that I am loved by God in Christ. As a church, if we miss the fundamentals we will not succeed. "A Church that loses the gospel is a losing church, no matter how many political," social, cultural, or technological "victories it wins" (Moore).
- Let's not drift from the simple truth of the gospel. It is easy to miss the wonder and beauty of the gospel when you are always around it. We must fight the idea that there is something beyond the gospel. Anyone who says they need more than the gospel has missed the plot.
 - There is no "next level" Christianity. Christian maturity is not secret knowledge but steady growth in the gospel through Christ. **Christian growth is the process of remaining in Christ not moving on from him.**

There's a Reason Why It's Famous: Often cited as a summary of the core message of Christian faith because it contains the central message of the gospel, that Christ died for our sins so that we could have eternal life through faith in him.

- We would do well to ponder the 25 words of this powerful verse (GNT; 24 ESV).

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹²

1. True Love is a Gift from God

Context: Now, this famous verse doesn't just fall out of the sky onto an inspirational mug or Christian t-shirt. It comes as an explanation following the discussion Jesus has with Nicodemus, the Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus recognizes something special about Jesus as a teacher sent from God but he, at this point, has fallen short of salvation. Jesus explains that he has to be "born again" or "born from above" to enter the KoG. It's not something that can be achieved through physical means or human effort but is a spiritual transformation that only comes from God.

Problem: Earlier in Jn 3:14-15, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of a situation in Num 21 where the Israelites were in the desert and complaining that God would save them out of Egypt ("Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"). God had sent "fiery serpents" and the people were dying from their bites. This was a direct punishment for their sin, so God told Moses to make a bronze version of one of these serpents and put in on a pole "if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."

- Jesus is highlighting the salvation of God in Jesus through this story: And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (Jn 3:14-15).

¹ ¹⁶ Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

² For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (CSB).

- The typology of this story, explained by Jesus, sets the foundation for this verse.
 - It reminds us of **the stakes are high**. Those dying from serpents in the wilderness didn't need therapeutic reassurance or self-help mantras, they needed life. They had poison in their veins.
 - And, while we might not have snakes in our church tonight, we have been bitten by the curse and need salvation. The gospel is *good news* because there is *bad news*.

He First Loved Us: For God (γὰρ ὁ θεὸς)³

- The starting point of the gospel is God. He is the initiator. He is the rescuer.
- "In the beginning God."
 - We are dead in our trespasses when he makes us alive (Eph 2:5).
 - He loved us first (1 Jn 4:19).
- We don't find God, discover God, figure God out. He finds us, he opens our eyes, his "goodness and mercy" pursues us (Ps 23:6).

Debated Adverb: so (Οὕτως)⁴ This word can have one of two meanings, (1) degree (e.g., intensity of the love) or (2) manner (e.g., in this way). I think John is emphasizing *both* the *degree* to which God loved the world as well as the *manner* in which he expresses that love (which also highlights its extent).

- John is great at double meaning (e.g., "born again" or "born from above"; γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν).

God loved us to a degree unimaginable and we see just how great the extent of his love is by the manner in which it is displayed, the gift of Jesus.

- **Imagine the greatest love you can.** Start with the most love you've ever felt. As a spouse, on your wedding day, your heart is overflowing with love; as a parent, the moment your child is born, you are given a love that is literally 'beyond you.' You never knew you had that capacity. Take that love, and keep going, and you will still not be able to fully feel or express the love that God has shown.
- In many ways, all the emphasis of this verse is on this one word: "so."

Love of God: loved (ἠγάπησεν)

- Again, we trivialize, this statement ("Jesus loves me, this I know"). Do you know? Do you believe? Do you feel?
 - "(1) To be loved but not known is superficial. (2) To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. (3) But to be fully known and truly loved is what we need more than anything. It liberates, humbles, and fortifies us" (Keller). Only God truly loves like this.
- God's love is so different than even the best versions of human love.

³ Not Red Letters (1899 invention). Not "less than" Jesus words ("all Scripture is God-breathed"). Don't let the bright colors distract you from the fact that every single word of Scripture is equally given by God. Grammatically, we see a new section indicated by the intersentential, postpositive γὰρ. We also see other hints like the use of μονογενής, a "John" rather than "Jesus" word (e.g., 1:14, 18; 1 Jn 4:9).

⁴ This word ("so") can mean either (1) degree (e.g., "I ate so much candy") or simply (2) manner (i.e., "in this way"). See NET study notes for likelihood it is "both."

- So many people balk at God's love (e.g., "God can't love me," because they equate God's love to human love. But God's love is so much more).
- This verse is a picture of a different kind of love. It reshapes our paradigm for perfect love. It not only fulfills the desire for love that we all have, but it also teaches us what kind of love we are to seek.
 - It is a sacrificial love. It does not love because we did something to earn it. It is a permanent love.
- We love reading our kids the *Jesus Storybook Bible* (it's probably more for us than them). When it discusses the early chapters of the Bible, it calls the story of Adam and Eve "The Terrible Lie." The author says when they sinned a "terrible pain came into God's heart. His children hadn't just broken the one rule; they had broken God's heart. They had broken their wonderful relationship with him. And now he knew everything else would break. God's creation would start to unravel, and come undone, and go wrong. From now on everything would die – even though it was all supposed to last forever (i.e., eternal life). — In every human story, that would be "the end." However, in God's story, he pursues and rescues his children." Constantly through the story, the author describes the difference between our love and God's love by describing God's love as a "never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love." That is the difference.
- **Gospel love is different, it's real love.** It's not love for personal fulfillment. It's not love to be loved in return. It's the only love that exists completely and unreservedly for the other person.

Extent: the world (τὸν κόσμον) "Jews were familiar with the truth that God loved the children of Israel; here God's love is not restricted by" ethnicity or national origin (Carson).

- Elsewhere, John reminds believers *not* to love the world (1 Jn. 2:15-17). However, where Christians "are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation," God is able to love the world with the "selfless, costly love of redemption" (Carson).
- **What we have to offer the world is the gracious invitation of God's love.**
 - There is a "love deficit" in our world. People know what it's like to be used but don't know what it's like to be loved.

2. The Love of God is a Priceless Gift

Gift: that he gave (ὥστε...ἔδωκεν)

- You didn't deserve it. You didn't earn it. God's love, your salvation **is a gift.**
 - Once you've truly internalized this truth—**that everything you have, all of life—is a gift**, it changes the way you relate to God, others, and your own life.
 - You go from entitled to grateful, from anxious to thankful, from stingy to generous.
- You stop trying to please God and begin to learn what it means to love God. You stop trying to earn his affection and start to receive his grace.

Grace: The believer, the one who comes to Jesus, comes by the grace of God. They come with a profound sense of God-dependent humility that every good thing they do is only possible “in God.”

- For Nicodemus and many others, the question of salvation was what must I “do,” how must I behave, how do I get my act together and clean myself up. Jesus is telling them, not what to do, but what has been done. “Moralism beautifies tombs. The gospel opens them” (Smethurst)

Priceless: *his* only Son (τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ). This word (μονογενής) has been variously translated. Its components literally mean “only” + “begotten” (or “born”). But compound words are not simply reducible to their parts any more than a “butterfly” is a flying stick of butter or a “bullpen” is a cage for bulls rather than where pitchers warm up in baseball.

- Jesus is the only begotten son of God (“begotten not made”) but this word really means “unique” or “only one of its kind.” such that Isaac can be described this way (even though he is not the “only begotten” son of Abraham but the “one-of-a-kind” son, the “child of the promise.” So, in John’s gospel, “all Christians are children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ), Jesus is God’s Son in a unique, one-of-a-kind sense.”
- “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).
- “No one has ever seen God; the one and only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).
- So God gave his “one and only” (unique) son.

Jesus “has no equal.” There is none that is like him or can ever be like him.

- This is one of the main ingredients that separates Christianity from all false religions (including Mormonism). We cannot become what Jesus is. Even in our adoption as sons, we are qualitatively different than the *one and only* son. We can become children but we can’t become him. We can have his righteousness but not be righteous as him.
- Jesus is matchless. Nothing he does falls short.

So, for God to give him for our sins shows us just how much he loves us.

- What determines something’s worth?
 - Scarcity (e.g., *Mona Lisa*).
 - Value. How much you love something. I have some possessions that are not worth much money but are extremely valuable to me (e.g., cards from my kids).
- God did not just give the law, or a prophet, or a king but his own Son. He didn’t give us a lamb, or bull, or goat, but his Son.

And it changes everything. God gave the highest gift he could give.

- We should **marvel** at such a gift. We should also **remember** we have demonstrable proof that God loves us completely.
 - He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32).
- If you ever doubt God loves you, remember what he gave to save you. If you ever doubt how valuable you are, remember the price Jesus paid.

3. The Love of God is a Pressing Invitation

Point: that whoever believes in him (ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν)

- The reality of God's gift invites **everyone** to respond. This is not merely a personal decision based on cultural preferences but a universal reality that everyone must deal with. Jesus is not merely an example to follow (though he is), he is the means to a reconciled relationship with God.
- But it's not automatic. You have to place your faith (believe) in him.

Faith involves (1) knowing Christ, (2) loving Christ, and (3) surrendering to Christ. Placing your trust in him.

- "Your heart cannot love what your mind does not know." But simply knowing information about God, even the right information, isn't the same thing as believing.
 - "Saying good things isn't the same as having good character. Giftedness is not the same thing as godliness. Orthodox teaching is not the proof of righteous living" (Jackie Hill Perry).
 - "Right doctrine doesn't change you. Seeing God changes you. Right doctrine can help you see God rightly, like focusing a camera on a beautiful sunset. Therefore we desperately need right doctrine. But doctrine is a means to an end. The end is seeing God. That's what changes us" (Dane Ortlund).
- Faith is not just "saying" we believe, or thinking the right things, it is putting our entire lives, hopes, dreams, desires, and future into God's hands. It is submission and trust. It is surrender.

Can you imagine a tightrope stretched over a quarter of a mile and spanning the breadth of Niagara Falls? The thundering sound of the pounding water drowning out all other sounds as you watch a man step onto the rope and walk across! This stunning feat made Charles Blondin famous in the summer of 1859. He walked 160 feet above the falls several times back and forth between Canada and the United States as huge crowds looked on with shock and awe. Once, he crossed in a sack, once on stilts, another time on a bicycle, and once, he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet! On July 15, Blondin walked backward across the tightrope to Canada and returned pushing a wheelbarrow while blindfolded. The crowds watched and "Oooooohed" and "Aaaaahed!" He asked his audience, "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd enthusiastically shouted "Yes!" They believed. It was then Blondin posed the question: "Who will get in the wheelbarrow?" None did.

- For many of you, it's not a knowledge problem it's a surrender problem. You want the name of Christ but you still want to be in charge of your own life. The only thing keeping you from Christ is yourself.
- Everyone is invited to believe but not everyone is willing to surrender.
 - Belief is not a penance you have to pay or a hoop you have to jump through, it is a reorientation and surrender of your life to Christ.
 - It's scary to dangle over the waterfall but in the arms of your Savior, it is the only means to salvation.
- This is trust not just for a crowd trick over a waterfall but for escape from a burning building. The danger is not simply great if you walk out on the rope, it's greater if you stay in the burning building.

Perish: should not perish (μὴ ἀπόληται)

- The great choice. There is no third option. Either one believes and experiences new birth, eternal life, and salvation or they do not and perish, lose their life, and are doomed to destruction (Carson).
- This is the weight that should motivate us every day.
 - If life and death are at stake, why don't we care? Why don't we care that our neighbors, family, and friends are perishing? Is our reputation worth more than their eternal destiny? Is our comfort a higher priority than their life or death? Church, are we waging the battle of life and death, or are we distracted with less important things?

Eternal Life: but have eternal life (ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον)

- The whole point of John is to highlight this eternal life that is available for all. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but *these* are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:30-31).
 - "Whoever believes may have eternal life" (Jn 3:15)
 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:24).
 - "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).
 - Life in Christ is eternal, it starts now and last forever, because we have Christ who is present now and never ends, and he keeps all those that are his. So, though we may die, yet we will live.
 - Yes, eternal life means that we will not die but it is centered around the person in him we have life, it is fellowship with God and the enjoyment of his presence for eternity.
- Eternal life is not merely freedom *from* death but freedom *for* a life worth living, a life reconciled to God.

Invitation

Back to the Serpent: I think of that serpent in the wilderness. No one who had poison in their veins would have been too busy to look. They wouldn't get around to it "some day." They wouldn't dare divert their gaze to their cell phone. They wouldn't be chasing a promotion or a relationship, they would stop and stare.

- For the Christian, this is no less true (in fact it's more true). We don't come to God lethargic and distracted but desperate to get a glimpse of him. We don't fall into the trap of familiarity, our "looking" becomes more intense. Our worship doesn't trail off into boredom but intensifies its gaze.
- John 3:16 doesn't become a pithy Christian statement but a picture of God's grace from which you never recover because God gave us the greatest gift so that we could have life.