

John 3:16

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

God Loves Us

I.

The gospel in a nutshell. That's what this verse has been called. It just rattles off the tongues of many—even most—Christians. It rattles off because we hear it called the gospel in a nutshell so often. It's true...it is a great summary of the gospel. It is the entirety of the gospel all boiled down into one short verse. But...

Have you ever *really* given it much thought? Does it just rattle off your tongue without you ever stopping to contemplate the verse? I think for most of us that is really the case. This one verse will serve as the sermon text for tonight, and next week, and Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. When the gospel truly is in a nutshell, there's so much to unpack that we shouldn't just give it a perfunctory moment of our time or attention or study.

I once thought I had a pretty good handle on this verse. Then a former professor was invited to speak at our pastors' conference about mining the text to really dig for the gold God has to offer his people in the Scripture readings we use in a sermon. He emphasized this by pointing to John 3:16. All the pastors sat there smugly thinking that this was going to be easy. The good professor proceeded to talk for 15 minutes about the very first word of the verse. No, not "God." The word "For" (John 3:16, EHV).

"For" connects this verse to the verses before. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, who wanted to know more about what Jesus had been teaching. Jesus began to teach Nicodemus this way: "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3, EHV). Being born from above—being born again, as it is sometimes translated—is a difficult thing to understand. "For" at the beginning of the gospel in a nutshell looks back to that.

The two verses immediately before our text provide a little closer context for "for." "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15, EHV). Jesus pointed Nicodemus ahead to Jesus' own death and resurrection before speaking about what God had done and was doing...and his reasons for doing it.

II.

Now it's time to move to the second word: "God." Maybe it doesn't seem that this word needs much emphasis. It's a pretty obvious word for Christians. But if you ask people what the Christmas season is all about, what responses do you get? "Christmas is all about love. It's about caring for the needy. It's about peace on earth. It's about goodwill among people. It's all about family."

In a sense, there's nothing wrong with most of the things on that list. Maybe lists like that are why Christmas has more and more been dubbed the "Holiday" season. Just about anything can fit into caring for the needy and love and family and goodwill. People *need* some of these things to survive as a community.

While these things are not wrong, in and of themselves, they ignore God. We praise ourselves, not him. We admire how good *we* are, and what great things *we* do.

Muslims and Hindus and atheists can do things that appear to be good to the world. Every society and every religion teach love and goodwill and peace and unity—at least in some fashion. All of this is *social* goodness. There's nothing wrong with it, but it is not Christmas. It is not Christian. It is not godly.

III.

Christmas is all about love. So say many in their list about what Christmas really is. In fact, the things on that list can lead to idolatry. We make ourselves into gods. We praise ourselves. Christmas makes many people feel guilty and needing to give charitably to those less fortunate. We create a religion of good works. We create our own gods—and they look just like us.

Have you ever heard of the Christmas truce? It happened during World War I. There was an unofficial cease fire. Men from both sides of the war went out into no man's land and celebrated together. But did the truce last? Of course not. The next day they went back to shooting one another. It was all built on an illusion of human goodness.

“For God so loved...” God's goodness is not an illusion. The Apostle James writes: “Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights” (James 1:17, EHV). *True* goodness is only in God. Scripture tells us of God's ability to forgive us, time and time again. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, because he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13, EHV). This is our source of comfort and confidence in life and in death. God not only forgives, he forgets. He wipes our slate clean because of Christ. “I will forgive their guilt, and I will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34, EHV).

That is goodness. *That's* love. *That's* divine. *That's* the goodness of Christmas, “*God* so loved.”

IV.

For God so loved *the world*. It is significant that John records God so loved the *world*. The world in John's gospel is the enemy of God. It's the world that won't recognize Jesus (Jn 1:10-11). It's the world that will hate us, his followers (Jn 15:18). It's in the world that we will have trials and tribulation (Jn 16:33).

Yet in John's gospel, Jesus is the Savior of the world (Jn 4:42). He takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). He is the light of the world (Jn 8:12).

And in our verse today: “God so loved the world.” What a comfort that is! The world is too often me, you. Too often we don't recognize and receive him. Too often we rebel against him. Too often we give Satan free reign and let *him* control our lives, rather than our Lord Jesus. God *should* condemn the world and reject the world and punish the world—and you and me.

He should—and he *did*. He punished Jesus—the unblemished Lamb of God. God's righteous judgment and wrath had to be met. Jesus gave his life so that God's judgment would fall on *him*, not on us.

God is not like us. God is good. He does not love as we do. He does not forgive as we do. His ways are not our ways. His ways are far beyond anything we can conceive or understand. He loved the world—he love *us*—so much that he determined to stop at absolutely nothing to bring salvation to us.

V.

That is why Christmas is so special to us. We can see ourselves as his dearly loved children. He did it all for us. He gave his all for us.

Sometimes we fail. Sometimes we fall back into old habits. Truth be told, the “sometimes” is really “all the time.” All too often we seem ashamed to speak up for him, even in this season of his birth.

God so loved the world. God so loved us. *That* is our comfort. *That* is what Christmas is all about. Amen.