

May 5, 2013

# The Love of God

John 3:16

**BI: In this manner God loved the world: He gave His Son, the only one, so that whoever believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life**

Today is Mother's Day and it just seems appropriate that we would be at a place in the gospel of John that encourages us to think about the love of God. Every time we see genuine, sacrificial love in this life it is a beautiful reflection of the infinite love of God. And there is perhaps no better picture of the love of God than the love of a mother for her children. So to all the mothers hearing my voice today, let me just say: I praise God for you because as you love your children with that tender, sacrificial, and sometimes fiercely protective love you show the rest of us and the world what God is like.

Toward the end of the N.T. in John's first epistle he tells us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). If there is any love in this world it is because God is love. He is the origin and the source of love. If He did not exist then there would be no such thing as love because love emanates from the essence of His being. It is one of His infinite attributes and one that he shares with us in measure.

With that in mind, however, that while Love is the best known it is also the least understood of all God's attributes. Almost everyone who believes in God these days believes that He is a God of love. Even people who have no relationship with God and engage in blatantly immoral and criminal activity are banking on the hope that God is love and that He will overlook their sin. But is this what it means when the Bible says "God is love?" Does it mean that God is to be thought of as "nice" and "tolerant" and "nonjudgmental" being who loves everyone the same and would never judge or condemn anyone?

I'm sure you are not surprised when you hear me say that there is much more to the love of God than this. I suspect most of you who are here this morning knows God and have walked with Him for years. Nevertheless, if you have thought about the love of God at anything deeper than a surface level you realize that understanding the nature of God's love is not that easy.

This morning we come to a passage that has been one of the most beloved texts in all of Scripture for as long as the Gospel of John has been in print. There is hardly a place in the world to which the gospel has gone that this verse has not become almost immediately known and loved. It is often the first verse that translators put into other languages. Millions of people have been taught to recite it. I've seen it printed on everything from highway billboards, to banners at professional baseball and basketball games, tattoos, and even on the bottom of fast food soda cups. It is probably the first Scripture you ever memorized. It is none other than John 3:16.

Let's begin by reading it or quoting it together. In the NASB it says, "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."

Now, let's refresh the context here for a moment, shall we? Jesus is in the middle of a private conversation with one of the rulers of the nation of Israel, a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. Now, old Nic came to Jesus in the middle of the night probably because he didn't want his fellow Pharisees to know that he was beginning to think that Jesus might be the Messiah. We learn from Jesus that what's really on Nic's mind is the question of how sinners can find entrance into the kingdom of God. What Jesus has shared with him so far has been shocking and unexpected.

Jesus explains, that the only people who will enter the kingdom of God (heaven) are those who have been "born again" by a supernatural and sovereign work of the H.S. that cannot be earned,

achieved, or controlled. Furthermore, Jesus chides Nicodemus because he should have already understood these things from all the New Covenant promises found in the O.T., of which he claimed to be an expert.

In verse 14 then, Jesus reveals that He himself is God's only means of salvation just as Moses' serpent in the wilderness provided salvation for all who were facing death because of their sin. The point of Jesus teaching here so far is that the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is by the regenerative work of the H.S. which leads to faith in Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus comes to the place of explaining where God the Father fits into the salvation equation. The question is, why would Jesus (the "Son of Man") ever choose to leave the eternal privileges and benefits of heaven to come to earth for to rescue rebellious sinners who have made themselves His enemies? The answer is this: Jesus came because the Father loves the very sinners who hate Him and He wants them to be saved.

Now I realize that there are probably some budding theologians in our midst who are disturbed at what I just said because you struggle with the thought that God loves sinners. So let me just kind of ratchet it up a little bit and say that I not only believe that God loves sinners, I believe God loves ALL sinners. Why? Because I believe that when John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world..." I believe He means the world in its fullest sense. He means everybody; all humanity; the entire human race.

I suspect *some* of you are asking, Why is that controversial? And that's a good question. So let's begin by asking another why this is a contemporary controversy.

## **I. The Contemporary Controversy:**

1. In our day there has been somewhat of a resurrection of the teaching of reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and many puritan pastors like John Owen, John Bunyan, Thomas Watson and others. And for that I am grateful because I think the doctrines that these men taught are now keeping the western church from running entirely off the cliff. Like us, all of these men held to a strong belief in the sovereignty of God over all things, and especially salvation.
2. Unfortunately, however, many of us (and I include myself in this) have misapplied the doctrines of grace (as they are called) to God's love of the world. Many have found a need to redefine the term "world" here in John 3:16 because they insist that God cannot possibly love those who never repent and believe. The argument frequently goes something like this: "Psalm 7:11 tells us 'God is angry with the wicked every day.' It seems reasonable to assume that if God loved everyone, He would have chosen everyone unto salvation. Therefore, God does not love the non-elect" (John MacArthur, *The Love of God*, Dallas, Word Publishing (1996), p. 12).
3. One scholar who may be credited with espousing this view most successfully is and true bother by the name of A.W. Pink who argued that "God loves whom He chooses. He does not love everybody" (Ibid, p. 13). He argued that "world" should be understood as "a world of believers (God's elect), in contradistinction from "the world of the ungodly."
4. Others will say, (as I once did) that the term "world" means people from every corner of the globe. A throng of saints from every nation, people, tribe, and tongue." But I no longer believe that. Rather, I have come to believe that the meaning of the term "world" is apparent on its face. It means humanity, or the human race.
5. And the reason I believe that is not because I have in any way abandoned the doctrines of grace, but because I am committed (as I know you are) to believing *NOT* so much what theologians say, but what the Scriptures teach... especially about the nature and character of God. So my view on this has changed because I think there is a compelling explanation from Scripture that leads us to believe that what Jesus is speaking of here is God's love for the human race.

## **II. A Compelling Explanation:**

1. First, consider the fact that even sinful human beings like you and me are capable of loving people whom we hate and hating people we love. Our relationships with one another are not

simplistic. They are extremely complex. If you have siblings, you know this intuitively. If you are married, you have experienced this in really baffling ways. You might have said about your boss “We have kind of a Love-Hate relationship.” You see, there is this kind of complexity in all relationships.

2. Beloved, where do you think we got the capacity to relate to people in such complex and complicated ways? Let me suggest that we received this ability when we were created in the image of God. This is what God is like! Let me show you from Scripture.

3. Throughout Scripture God demonstrates His love for humanity by calling, inviting, and pleading with unbelievers to turn and escape the judgment that is their due.

Eze. 33:11 God tells the prophet, “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked*, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’” Someone may say, well this was simply an example of God pleading with His elect people, Israel. But surely we all know that not all Israel would be saved. In fact, most of them turned their backs on God. And consider Isa. 45...

Isaiah 45:22 “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other.” I am suggesting that God’s offer of salvation is always an expression of His love. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Isaiah 55:1 “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost; (v. 7) “Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.” Is this not an expression of God’s love for sinners? Not just for elect sinners, but for ALL sinners! In this text “everyone” is defined as “wicked and unrighteous” people. And in case anyone were to think that God meant something else, consider what He says in Isa. 65...

Isaiah 65:1–2 “I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask *for Me*; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I,’ To a nation which did not call on My name. <sup>2</sup> “I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, Who walk *in* the way which is not good, following their own thoughts.” Beloved, this is God expressing His indiscriminate love on unbelieving Israel and on the world.

4. Surely His pleading with the lost, His offers of mercy to the reprobate, and the call of the gospel to all who hear are all sincere expressions of the heart of a loving God” (MacArthur, *LOG*. P. 17).

However, we need to be clear that explaining God’s love for wicked, rebellious sinners is not as simplistic as modern evangelicalism wants to make it. The fact is while the Scriptures clearly demonstrate that God *loves* sinful humanity, we cannot deny that the Scriptures also teach that God *hates* the wicked.

Mal. 1:3 & Rom. 9:13 God says, “I have hated Esau.” The context of these Scriptures show that God was not simply speaking of the man named Esau, but to the whole race of wicked people who came from him (Edom).

Psalms 7:11, “God is angry with the wicked every day” (NKJV).

In Psa. 139:21-22 David speaks of His own righteousness when he says to God, “Do I not hate those who hate you? I hate them with the utmost hatred.” This hatred is expressed in Scripture as a virtue that is characteristic of God Himself.

5. So there is a true and accurate sense in which God hates the wicked. Now, some try to wiggle out of this by saying that God “hates the sin and loves the sinner.” But that is a false dichotomy. We know that because in Scripture Hell is not simply a place where God condemns “sin,” but a place where He condemns “sinners.” As Paul said in Romans 11:22, “Behold the kindness and severity of God.” He loves the world and takes *NO* delight in the death of the wicked. We were *all* created in His image and He loves *all* that He has made. On the other hand, He hates the wicked for their rebellion and unbelief.

6. But there is more. God’s love for a sinful, rebellious humanity is also demonstrated by the Law of God. What are the two greatest commandments? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart

of God. What are the two greatest commandments? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and Love your neighbor as yourself.” Now when God says that we are to love our neighbor, does that mean only our elect neighbors?” That couldn’t possibly be because we don’t know who the elect are.

7. And consider this, when Jesus came to earth He came *NOT* to abolish the law but to fulfill it. That means that Jesus himself loved His neighbor, even the non-elect; even people who would never respond to His love in faith; even men like Judas Iscariot who would betray Him in the most criminal way.

8. In fact, it was Jesus who taught us to love *NOT* only our neighbors, but our enemies as well. In fact, one of Jesus’ most famous parables is the story of the “good Samaritan.” That beloved, is a story of a man from a semi-pagan race which had utterly corrupted Jewish worship and were thought to be enemies of God, but who stopped by the roadside one day to rescue a Jewish man who has robbed, beaten, and left for dead. It was Jesus’ illustration of indiscriminate love. And He offered it as an explanation of who we should consider our neighbor so that we would know whom God wants us to love; Namely, everyone.

9. Consider also the story of Jesus’ interaction with the rich young ruler in Mark 10. This young man wanted Jesus to explain to Him how to have eternal life. When Jesus answered Him the young man turned away. He turned His back of Jesus’ offer of salvation because it would cost him too much. Nevertheless, Mark 10:21 says, “Looking at him, Jesus felt love for Him...”

10. One more proof that God loves the world indiscriminately; Matt. 5:43-45 Jesus says the following:

You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’<sup>44</sup> “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous.

11. So you see, beloved; God loves the world! And He loves the world indiscriminately. He loves every human being born on this earth! So as we come to John 3:16 let’s be careful not to dilute the impact Jesus means to make on the heart of Nicodemus when He says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

12. Now I know that many of you are thinking, “I still have questions. Is God’s love for everyone in the world the same? How do we account for the fact that two verse after John 3:16 Jesus speaks of those whom God will judge by God.

13. Those are excellent and relevant questions, and we will look at them next time. But let me suggest that the answers to such questions become all the more powerful when we understand the glorious depth and complexity of the infinite love of God.

14. That’s why Paul prayed for us as he did in Ephesians when he asked that we would “be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,<sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.