

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY--LOVE
John 3:16

Grace For The Journey Message Series
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You may have noticed a few years ago that when you watched a major sporting event on TV; if they would pan the camera on the crowd that often there would be someone holding up a sign with the words, “John 3:16.” A number of times there were people, sitting in the stands behind a basketball hoop, who would hold up this sign whenever a player would shoot a free throw.

I understand there was an actual Christian group that was promoting and encouraging people to bring these large poster signs (with John 3:16 on them) to as many nationally televised events as they could. They believed that it would be a good way to lift up this wonderful message of Jesus that is found in this beloved Bible passage.

Since I have not seen these signs as much anymore it seems as if those in charge of these sporting events, as well as the television networks, have taken steps to not allow these signs in stadiums; either that or have simply decided not to show them. I’m sure they don’t want to offend anyone or make it seem like they are promoting a certain religion.

Yet what is it about John 3:16 that it has such power? This morning we will take some time to study and better understand these important Biblical words found in John 3:16. I encourage each one to know and memorize this verse; to claim the promises that are there; to be able to explain to someone else the truth of Jesus found in this verse.

John said, “*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.*” Please say this passage with me. I’m sure that many of you learned and even memorized this verse when you were a child.

The simple message and truth of this passage is that it first of all proclaims, “*For God so loved the world that he gave.*” The truth is that when God wanted to tell us how much he loves us he didn’t just send us a letter; he didn’t just say some nice and flowery words of love in the Bible.

No when God wanted to tell us how much he loves us he gave us his very own Son. Through his son Jesus, of course, God showed his amazing love by suffering and dying for you and me. Jesus in fact paid the ultimate price by dying on the cross out of love for you.

Jesus said in John 15:13, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” Yet Jesus’ love is even greater and more wonderful than this—the Apostle Paul said in Romans 5:8, “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

God loved us so much that he gave his only son to die for us—even when none of us deserve it; even when many of us turn away from him and deny him; even when we reject his friendship and love. God’s love is greater than any human love; greater than any love we can understand. His love is everlasting; totally unconditional; centered completely in giving himself as a gift.

Understanding this truth is why it is often so troubling to see and hear people talk about love today. Our culture's romantic and popular concept of love is pretty much that it is all about me, myself and I; mostly about us. Today people talk a lot about what they need to get out of a relationship; the focus is on how I feel; how much I am loved; how love fulfills my needs.

Even in the church today there is often the attitude of what's in it for me? Individuals often obsess about whether certain people and the congregation are doing enough for me. Are the people reaching out enough to me; are they doing things the way I like them done; are they agreeing with me about certain issues; are they caring enough about my needs and feelings?

It is ironic, however, that true love is not to be about getting; it is rather about giving. Love is not a noun; it is not an obscure ideal that is supposed to make us feel a certain way. Rather love is an action verb; it is something we do for others as a gift without expecting anything in return; it is loving others as God has loved us.

An important lesson and truth is that if you are not feeling loved; if you are not feeling appreciated; if you are not feeling cared about go and do something loving for someone else. If you aren't feeling much love from your spouse; a friend; from your parent/grandparent/relative/child—go and do something loving for them. Immerse yourself in giving and serving these other people.

Truth is that feelings generally follow actions. In other words when you live a life of love; when you show sacrificial and grace-centered love for others you will actually feel more love/caring in your heart. In other words the saying is true: *"Love isn't love until you give it away."*

Therefore the great good news found in John 3:16 is that God loved you so much that he gave his only son. God loved you so much that he sacrificed and gave up his whole life on the cross for you. He did it all even though none of us deserve it; it is totally a gift of grace.

Now it is important to note that one way we as people often seriously misunderstand this passage is that we simply stop at this first part of the passage; at this promise of God's love. Lots of people like us have easily cheapened this message of God's love and grace by surmising that since God loves them so wonderfully, that then it doesn't really matter how one lives or what we do in our daily actions, words, attitudes.

It is easy to reason that if God loves me even in my sins and sinful actions; then it doesn't really matter very much if I continue to do the same old sinful actions. It doesn't matter if I go to church; if I serve and give of myself by helping anyone else; if I change anything about my lifestyle, attitudes, actions. Since Jesus loves and shows me his amazing grace no matter what I do, I can then pretty much live whatever way I think is right.

However the important Bible truth is that this passage does not simply end there. Rather it says, *"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."* God loves you with his amazing love—not so that you would take advantage of his love; not so that you condone every behavior and attitude; but so that you will allow his love to change you; to renew you; to fill you with belief and faith.

John 3:16 reminds us that on our own without Jesus we will surely perish eternally. My friends, that is why God sent Jesus to suffer and die on the cross. Jesus took all the powers of sin, death, and hell upon himself so that we can avoid the fate of perishing eternally. Yet to share in that victory Jesus calls you to believe in him; to follow him; to serve him.

I heard this illustration one time: for increasing numbers of people today their thinking about God is like an Online dating service. In other words, they can find out lots of information about God; they can look at his picture; his profile; can even study many of his sayings like John 3:16.

Yet with Online dating there is a huge difference between looking at all this information about someone and when one actually meets their date in person. There is a big difference between finding out some likes and dislikes about a person, and actually meeting and getting to know them in a personal way. It is where fantasizing about someone actually becomes reality.

In the same way lots of people today simply know some things about God; many even say that they think it's great that God is a God of love. Yet an important truth is that our God is not at all satisfied with that kind of situation; he is not satisfied with people just knowing some facts and information about him.

Rather our God calls each person into an actual dating relationship where you experience him face to face. He calls you to not simply know some things about his love, but rather to share in a relationship with him where you get to know his love in a personal way. God calls you to commit your whole heart; your whole life; to put your faith and trust in him.

An important truth for us to understand is that those who know this love of God; those who are living in a daily relationship with him, they are the ones who also want to worship him faithfully; they want to learn and follow his Word; they want to live as his disciple. When we know God's amazing love and grace in our hearts by faith, it is then truly a joy and privilege to live for him. It is never a have to; rather always a want to.

One more thought: John 3:16 also says, "*that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*" My friends, isn't it your wish and concern that none of your friends/family/neighbors end up missing out on God's love and promises? Isn't it your hope and prayer that each person may share in the joys of eternal life in heaven?

The good news is that when we know God's love by faith; when we live in relationship with him we have the honor and privilege of telling others about our God of love. We have the awesome calling of being able to share our stories of faith; to explain how God's love is working in us. Lots of people around us have never met; they have never even heard about our personal and loving God who lives in us. We have a tremendous love story to share.

Therefore I encourage you this week to memorize, think about and focus on these words from John 3:16. Remember each day that God loves you so much that he gave; he loves you so much that Jesus died for you; and through his love he wants you to believe and trust in him—so that you will not perish, but will have eternal life.