

**Sermon Study Guide Based on
Associate Pastor Larry Omasta's Message of September 27, 2009
"John 3:16 – Insight into the Heart of God"**

[John 3:16 is a window through which we can clearly see and understand the good news that God the Father loves us unconditionally and that Jesus, the Son of God, has already redeemed all of humanity.]

[Topics: God's Love; Belief in Jesus; Eternal Life]

Excerpt: [The sermon began with the telling of an Irish joke where one of the two Irish brothers flying on Aer Lingus 747 to Boston erroneously thought that if they lost one more engine after the plane lost two of its engines, which delayed their arrival time, that they would "be stuck up in the sky for ever."]

Irish humor highlights the famous Irish logic or illogic in a humorous way, because in these jokes much of the Irish logic is based on misconceptions and false reasoning.

Now a lot of people today, including Christians, unfortunately have misconceptions about who God is and what his plan of salvation is all about. People erroneously believe that God is an angry vengeful God difficult to please and whose wrath can only be turned aside with great effort and cost.

And because of this view, people also erroneously believe that salvation is difficult to obtain and even more difficult to hold on to. They believe that their salvation is so easily lost depending on what they do or don't do to please God.

So, today we're going to take a look at one of the most amazing verses in the entire Bible, because of what it reveals about God and his plan for humanity. This verse is a window into the heart of God. And that's **John 3:16**. We're going to see that **John 3:16** exposes and demolishes these misconceptions most people have about what God is really like and what his plan of salvation is all about.

Hopefully, by the end of today's message, all of us will be able to convincingly show to others that **John 3:16** is like a window through which we can clearly see and understand the good news that God the Father loves us unconditionally and that Jesus, the Son of God, has already redeemed all of humanity through his death, resurrection and ascension.

John 3:16 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.**" Now, there are just 26 words in this verse. And because we are so familiar with this verse that I think we miss the depth of information that's there. So, what we're going to do is break it down into 4 distinct phrases to see exactly: 1) who God is – that is his overall character trait, 2) what God is – that is we'll see he's a triune God and what that means and 3) what his plan is for all humanity.

The message today is partially based on Max Lucado's book *John 3:16 – The Numbers of Hope* (Published 2007). And it's also based on some thoughts from other authors and

Biblical commentary writers and perhaps most importantly the latest booklet by Grace Communion International – *A Brief Introduction to Trinitarian Theology*.

The first phrase we'll look at is: "**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.**"

First of all, the Greek verb translated "love" is *agapao*, which means the unconditional love that God has shown to humanity to redeem us. Most scholars agree that it's a far greater love than the Greek verb *phileo*, which describes a deep affection for a friend or family member.

1 John 4:8 tells us, "**Whoever does not love (agapao) does not know God, because God is love (agape).**" The noun *agape* reveals God's deepest nature. *Agape* does NOT define an aspect of God or one feature of his many character traits. But rather *agape* describes the sum total of the very nature of God. *Agape* also summarizes the activity of God's actions throughout the course of human history from the creation of Adam and Eve, through the sending of his Son right up to our present age and beyond.

This love of God is a freely given love, an everlasting love that can never be taken away from us. God's love is difficult for us to comprehend and accept because, unlike most of our love, it's unconditional. We cannot earn or win God's unconditional love for us because of our good deeds. Neither can our imperfections and sins cause us to lose God's love.

And that's because at the worst possible time in our lives when we were the most sinful, God reached out to us because he loves us. Paul tells us in **Romans 5:8**, "**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" As Max Lucado notes: God loves us with an unearthly love. His unconditional love won't ever be taken back, withdrawn or revoked.

The apostle Paul encourages us by showing God's unfailing love for us in **Romans 8:38-39**. "**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39) neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love (agape) of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**"

Now let's consider for a few minutes how the love of God ties in with his being a triune God. Christianity is alone among the world's religions teaching that God is triune. The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one being who exists eternally in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity means that God is relational.

If God were just one person, and not a triune God, he could NOT have been loving for all eternity. If God were just one person, he could NOT have love described as his sum total essence. Just one individual alone can't express outgoing love. (We're not talking about narcissism – self-love.) Since God is triune, then loving relationships radiate from him. And since God is triune he created the capacity for humans to love, as well.

Each person of the Trinity loves, defers to and rejoices in the others. This creates a dynamic movement or dance of joy and love. The early church fathers had a word for this – perichoresis. Our English word "choreography" comes from it and it means to dance or flow around.

In a self-centered lifestyle, we are static, stationary. In self-centeredness, we demand that others orbit around us. Oh, we'll do good things and give affection to others, as long as it fulfills us or helps us meet our self-centered personal goals.

But the inner life of the triune God is characterized by mutual self-giving love not self-centeredness. The inner life of the triune God centers on the interests and desires of the others. Each honors and glorifies the others (John 16-17). So you can now see how the outgoing love of God ties into his being a triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now let's look at the last part of this phrase – **For God so loved the world** – which is "**the world.**" The Greek noun for world is *kosmos*. And *kosmos* means "the world" which denotes the earth, or even the entire universe. It also consistently represents in the NT all of fallen humanity from Adam forward. God loves the people in this world in spite of our sinful ways, in spite of our hard-heartedness and stubbornness, in spite of our rebellion against him and our self-centeredness.

Other writers of the NT confirm this that Christ's sacrifice was for all humanity – past, present and future. Let's look at a few Scriptures. **1 Tim. 2:3-5, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4) who wants all (pantos) men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5) For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6) who gave himself as a ransom for all (pantos) men."**

The Greek word *pantos* means all, everyone. **2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone (pantos) to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."**

Even when we turn God down and refuse to accept his Son, the Father still doesn't reject us. But rather he continues to pursue us and continues to work with us.

In the phrase "**For God so loved the world...**" we need to see what it doesn't say. Seeing what it doesn't say is often helpful to us to clearly understand what it DOES say.

Note it does NOT say, "For God begrudgingly and with a lot of reservation loved the world." No God freely loved the world, because he is love. If God were an angry or vengeful God, he might punish the world or forsake the world or destroy the world. But God isn't an angry God. God, who is a loving God, "so loved the world."

Now it also doesn't say, "For God so loved the nearly perfect ones." No, God loved all of fallen humanity. Nor it doesn't say, "For God so loved only a select chosen few." No, it says God freely, on his own accord, loved the entire human race who has gone astray from him. Paul tells us in **Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** And yet this is who God loves.

Now let's on to the The second phrase. "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...**" God didn't love us in order to get something from us. But rather God loved us so much that he gave us an indescribable gift – "his one and only Son." God gave us this gift of his Son, not because we deserved it, but he gave him to us in spite of our rebellion and wickedness. Why did he do that? Because God loves his human creation. Love defines who God is.

Now the Greek word for “one and only” is *monogenes*, a compounded word of *monos* meaning “only” and *genes* meaning “species, race, family, kind.” Thus *monogenes* literally means only-begotten, unique, one of a kind.

But in the 4th century, a heresy known as Arianism taught that this Greek word *monogenes* indicates that Jesus was created by God and was not eternal with him. Even though this heresy has been disproved over and over again, there are several religious organizations today that still believe it and teach it.

However, the context of John’s gospel makes it clear that the Greek word *monogene* is emphasizing the unique relationship between God the Son and God the Father in the trinity.

John uses this word five times in his writings highlighting the unparalleled relationship between Jesus and the Father, which this Greek word *monogenes* signifies. The first one is **John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."**

The second one is **John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."** The third one is **John 3:16**. The 4th one is **John 3:18**, which we’ll look at later.

And the last one is in **1 John 4:9, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."**

Other NT scriptures also reveal that Jesus is the 2nd person of the trinity, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. [Let’s look at the first two verses of **John 1**. "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2) He was with God in the beginning.**" And then verse 14 tells us, "**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**"]

Col. 2:9, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Hebrews 1:3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." Other scholars translate it this way – “the Son ... is the exact expression of his (the Father’s) substance.”

Jesus himself told Philip how he was an integral part of the triune God. **John 14:9-10, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10) Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?"**

This is how Max Lucado describes who Jesus is in his book, “Jesus shares God’s DNA.” That’s a very good observation.

Now the 3rd phrase we’re going to look at is, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him ...**" The Greek word translated “whoever” is the pronoun *pas*, which means “all, every, everyone.” The term “whoever” rolls out the welcome mat of reconciliation to all humanity. There are no qualifiers to God’s offer. God offers his grace to everyone – to the whole world. No one is excluded. No one is too sinful. No one is too poor. No one is too handicapped – physically, mentally or emotionally.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **"But because of his great love (agape) for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5) made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5).**

And now the last part of this phrase – **"Whoever believes in him."** The Greek verb translated "to believe" has these deeper meanings: "to have faith in, to trust, to have confidence in and even to submit to." What is asked of any individual is to believe, to trust, have faith in and submit to the Son of God. That's God's invitation to us.

Our booklet, *A Brief Introduction to Trinitarian Theology*, talks about the distinction between a Christian (we'll call a believer) and a non-Christian (an unbeliever). "That all people are *included* in Christ (universally) but only believers *actively participate* (personally) in that inclusion." (Page 17). So, while all humanity has been reconciled to God through Christ, it's only believers who actively and personally participate in that reconciliation.

When we believe in Jesus Christ, when we put our trust in him and when we submit to him, we turn away from our self-centeredness and respond and turn towards God and graciously accept what he has already done for us, that is what's called "repentance."

But his invitation seems too simple to a lot of people. We prefer other verbs than "believe." For many, "work" has a better ring to it. "Whoever works or accomplishes good works for him will be saved." Works seem more reassuring, doesn't it? It seems we, as human beings, have an uncomfortable feeling about the concept of belief and faith and trust and accept the atoning work of Jesus on the cross that he's already accomplished for us.

The apostle John wrote in **John 1:12-13, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – 13) children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."**

Now, critics of Christianity say that believing "in him" meaning only believing in Jesus smacks of exclusion and intolerance. Their mantra is that all roads lead to God. You can get there many ways – through Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc and even through the goodness of humanism. But the NT says differently.

Jesus declares, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).** We need to notice that Jesus didn't say, "I know the way," or "I'll show you the way, or I'll teach you the way." No, Jesus very plainly says – **"I am the way."** In other Scriptures, Jesus says he is "the door" or the "gate."

Every non-Christian religion says, "You can save yourself. You can save yourself through prayers, chants, meditation, good works, vows of poverty, visitation of holy shrines, giving alms to the poor, rejection of all physical possessions and comforts". And the list goes on and on depending upon which religion you look at. But Jesus simply says, "I am the only one who can save you. Believe in me; believe me."

And the 4th phrase we'll look at is, **"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."** Now the Greek word translated "life" is *zoe*, which according to the scholars is a more noble word than *bios*, which also means life. While *zoe* can be used in connection with our temporal and

physical life, it is primarily used in Scripture in a spiritual sense to express eternal life given to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Zoe is found in the various titles and phrases to describe Jesus. For example, Jesus is "**the bread of life**" in **John 6:35, 48**; his words are "**spirit and life**" (**John 6:63**); Jesus has "**the words of eternal life**" (**John 6:68**); and he came to give "**life to the world**" (**John 6:33. 10:10**).

It's zoe that is used in the phrase "**the tree of life**" in **Rev. 2:7**, "**the crown of life**" in **Rev. 2:10**; and "**the Book of Life**" in **Rev. 3:5**

Now what is this "eternal life" we're promised? Well, we read in **1 John 5:1**, "**Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.**" We are reborn! This isn't a birth resulting from human passion or desire – this rebirth comes from God. Now eternal life and being born of God is synonymous.

Earlier in this chapter Jesus told Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Now we know that the Greek word *anōthen* is better translated "from above or from heaven" than "again." Jesus is referring to a spiritual birth, because of his next statement to Nicodemus. **Jesus answered, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6).**

Jesus is comparing our spiritual birth to our physical birth. Birth, by definition is a passive act. The baby in his/her mother's womb contributes nothing to the delivery. In most cases they hinder it. Birthing celebrations applaud the work of the mother not the newborn. She exerts all the effort. She pushes, pants, agonizes and delivers. Mom truly deserves a gold medal.

Similarly, spiritual birthing requires a capable parent, not an able infant. Just like at the time of our physical birth, we contribute absolutely nothing to our spiritual birth. Who is our spiritual parent? It's God the Father who makes it all possible – through Jesus Christ.

Now this last phrase, "**shall not perish but have eternal life,**" tells us that In the end there are those who perish and there are those who live. And what determines the difference? Not works, or talents or lineage, or education, or possessions. The difference is determined by our belief or our disbelief or unbelief in Jesus.

Verses 17-18 in John 3 make this abundantly clear. **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."**

In verses 17-18, the verb translated "**condemned**" in NIV, and "**judged**" in the NLT is from the Greek word *krino*, which means to judge, to decide between two choices, and also to condemn and to punish – depending upon the context. The noun form of the Greek is *krisis*, which we get our English word crisis. In most crises we have a decision to make – to decide between several choices.

Here's William Barclay's explanation of verse 18 where John wrote, "Whoever does not believe (in Jesus) stands condemned already

"If, when a man is confronted with Jesus, his soul responds to that wonder and beauty, he is on the way to salvation. But if, when he is confronted with Jesus, he sees nothing lovely, he stands condemned. His reaction has condemned him.

God sent Jesus in love. He sent him for man's salvation; but that which was sent in love has become a condemnation. It is not God who has condemned the man; God only loved him; the man has condemned himself." (Page 140; The Gospel of John, Vol. 1)

So that concludes our explanation of **John 3:16**. In summary let's review what this Scripture reveals to us about the character of God and the true essence of his plan of salvation for humanity.

First of all, **John 3:16** reveals that GOD IS LOVE. And because he is love, he demonstrates his unconditional, enthusiastic, over-the-top love for all humanity.

2) **John 3:16** reveals that God loves us so much that he sent, as a gift, the Word, the 2nd person of the trinity to this earth as Jesus the Christ, the Son of God to die for all humanity and to reconcile everyone to God the Father. It's a done deal. Reconciliation has taken place.

3) **John 3:16** reveals that the key is to believe in the Son and accept wholeheartedly his atoning work of reconciliation for us. It's not our good works that save us, but his work on the cross and being resurrected and ascended into heaven.

4) **John 3:16** reveals that because of our belief in Jesus we are born of God and have been granted eternal life with God.

Max Lucado sums up the message of **John 3:16** this way: God makes the offer – He loves; He gave. And then we respond – we believe; we live. That's such a powerful message we can easily share with everyone.

Key Scripture: John 3:16, "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."

General Group Question: What has moved you or impressed you the most about John 3:16?

Additional questions for the entire group or in groups of two or three of the same gender (15-20 minutes). If appropriate, please pray for each other's needs afterwards.

1. How would you describe the love of God?
2. What one character trait summarizes God's total nature?
3. Can anything separate us from God's love?
4. Who Does God love – nearly perfect people, a select chosen few or all of sinful humanity? Why?

5. How did God demonstrate his love for all humanity?
6. Is it important to believe in God's one and only Son? Why?
7. Are there many roads that lead us to God? What did Jesus say in John 14:6? Is Jesus the only way? Briefly explain why or why not.
8. Who is responsible for our spiritual birth – God or us? Briefly explain.
9. What is the ultimate reward given to us because of our belief or faith in Jesus Christ?

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