

Grace, Pure Grace

John 3:16

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 11-15-09

Introduction

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones once ministered to an individual who lamented that he could not be saved. When he assured him that all who called upon the Lord *will* be saved, the man responded that he was afraid that he had committed the unpardonable sin. Doctor Lloyd Jones told him that if he had committed the unpardonable sin, he would not be able to repent, but that all who repent will find forgiveness. But this man thought he was too horrible to be saved. Lloyd Jones read 1 John 1:9: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** He explained that since God cannot lie, a man who had committed the unpardonable sin could not repent and confess his sin. If he could repent and confess his sin, it would make God a liar. This passage says that anyone who confesses his sin will be forgiven. OK? It’s simple logic. The man still could not believe that God would forgive the sin he had committed.

Doctor Lloyd Jones went on the offensive and told the man that he was much worse than he thought he was; not only would he not repent and believe, he was calling God a liar. What audacity to call God a liar! The man was taken aback and asked how he had done that. Lloyd Jones said, I have just read God’s promise that he would forgive all sins, of all people who confess those sins, and you have just said that God will not do that. You are calling God a liar. You are guilty of blasphemy, unbelief, and slander of God. Indeed, you are guilty of idolatry because you have come to a god who is not the God of the Bible. Suddenly the lights came on for this man that he was holding on to the need to be just a little bit good before God would forgive him – just a little bit good. That’s our human nature – to want to hold on to just a little bit of goodness. But when he saw that the Gospel was good news to those who had not goodness, the lights came on, and he repented, believed, and was soundly converted. He finally came to see that salvation is of grace, grace alone, full grace, sufficient grace, and overflowing grace, grace that is greater than all my sin. And I love this verse’s expression of grace, pure grace.

John 3:16 would have been a startling verse to Nicodemus on many counts, because it went against Pharisaic doctrines. If you read very much in

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the traditions of the Pharisees you will know that this verse was a spiritual hand grenade. Contrary to Pharisaism, which emphasized man's labors to reach God, this verse shows the initiative being completely with God reaching out to man. Where Pharisees founded justification on their own works, this points to the work of Christ. Where Pharisees thought God loved righteous *Jews*, this passage shows that God loves believing *Gentiles* too. Contrary to Pharisaism, which thought that people could lose their salvation, the literal Greek emphasizes that every believing one is spared from judgment. And the way the Greek grammar works doubly emphasizes that. The *houtos hoste* clause with the indicative is a form of grammar that means "when this happens, this is always the consequence." Applied to this verse it means that all for whom God sent the Son will believe and will not be judged. There were many surprises for the Pharisee in this verse. While it is an incredible comfort to the elect, it is a verse that, when understood, turns the Pharisee upside down. And I want to give a twelve-point outline this morning - twelve windows on why salvation is grace, pure grace, sufficient grace, overflowing grace. As I go through this sermon, feel free to worship God, to praise Him, to shout out Amen.

I. The Reason for Pure Grace - "For"

The first word in this verse hints that there is a reason or a need for this pure grace. "**For** God so loved the world..." It's easy to skip over that word, but it tells us not to yank the verse out of context. Every time there's a "for," you need to ask what it's there for. Dana & Mantey's Greek Grammar says this is an explanatory "for." This verse was intended to explain what had been confusing to Nicodemus in the previous verses. It is really an answer to a Pharisee's confusion, and that is the clue to properly understanding this verse. I have heard people import all kinds of strange ideas into this verse that simply do not fit the context. And the word "for" indicates that it *has to* fit the context.

Liberals have used John 3:16 to teach the innate goodness of man. "After all," they might think, "God did love this world. It's basically good. It's worth saving." They add, "If God loves you, you are not worthless. There is something good in you." But that is backwards thinking that will let you down when you start sinning. Christ has been dealing with man's *unworthiness*, his *sinfulness* and his *deservingness* of judgment.

But there are other errors: Barthians (or neo-liberals – what some people call neo-Orthodox, but which is just a new kind of liberalism) use this verse to teach that all men will be saved. Christ explicitly in the context

indicates that there will be some people excluded from salvation. Don't yank the verse out of context. It's got a "for" at the beginning.

I have heard people say that this verse proves that man must make the first step to God before He can be saved. Christ has been arguing that we must be born again before we can make *any* steps. He has been arguing *against* a man-centered view of salvation.

One person interpreted John 3:16 as God's work of co-operation. God saves man by building a bridge over the chasm of hell, but He only builds it to within a few feet from your side of the gorge. The average evangelical would say you are responsible for providing the timbers of faith and meeting God part way. The five point Arminian would say that you are responsible for providing the bridge materials of faith *and* perseverance. A Pharisee would say you are responsible for faith, perseverance and sufficient good works.

Christ says, "You've got it all backwards. The only reason a person can have any spiritual acts at all; can have any faith at all, is if God has first given Him life." As verse 27 says, "**A man can receive *nothing* unless it has been given to him from heaven.**" And it's in heaven that he starts his discussion in verse 3. And so for our first point, I want to take a quick survey through verses 3-15 to show how these verses speak of sovereign grace.

Verse 3 says, "**Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again'**" [look in the margin. The literal Greek is "born from above". "Again" is a mistranslation in the KJV that has not been changed here. Everywhere else *anōthen* is translated "from above." So - "unless one is born from above"], "**he cannot see the kingdom of heaven.**" So the emphasis is on *God's* work. Rebirth comes from above, and until you are born from above, you cannot see spiritually. A baby is passive in birth. The same is true in spiritual birth. We don't get born again by believing. We believe because God has given us new life from above. For example, John 1:13 says, "**who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**" Man's will is altogether excluded. You have to be given a new will before you will exercise that will in a godly way. That's devastating to a Pharisee, and Nicodemus stumbles all over himself to avoid that conclusion in verse 4 because he doesn't understand grace.

In verse 5 Christ repeats that you can't work your way into the kingdom. You are born into the kingdom. And verse 6 indicates that only the Holy Spirit produces the new birth. Flesh produces flesh and Spirit produces *spiritual* birth. The only thing an unregenerate man can produce is

flesh. And so verse 7 repeats again, “**Do not marvel that I say to you, ‘You must be born from above.’**” There isn’t anything that man can supply that will be acceptable to God.

In verse 8 Jesus again shows that God’s grace is sovereign. There is no way you can put God in a box with good works or even with faith. “**The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.**” The new birth is when and where God wishes. Just as you can’t tame or control or guide the wind, you cannot tame, control or guide the Spirit. He is sovereign. He sovereignly brings new birth when and where He wishes.

Nicodemus is so saturated in Judaism that he says in verse 9, “**How can these things be?**” “That’s different than anything I’ve heard. I’ve heard that we have to contribute something.” And in verses 10-12 Christ basically tells Nicodemus to stop listening to the Pharisees and to start listening to Him. After all - verse 13 says, the Pharisees haven’t been to heaven, but Christ has.

Verse 14 destroys the idea that Jewishness can bring favor because it points to a time when God was going to wipe out the Israelite nation with a judgment of snakes. You remember the story? You couldn’t step anywhere without stepping on a poisonous snake. People were bitten in bed, at the dinner table, on the road and thousands were dying. It was terrifying to experience God’s judgment. What averted death? Nationality didn’t. They were Jews, and they were still dying. Works didn’t. Respectable Jews were dying right along with unrespectable Jews. God alone made the difference. He alone provided the remedy. And He alone provides the remedy in Christ.

So verses 1-15 were intended to humble Nicodemus by pointing to sovereign grace. The moment we start looking to man for explanations, we begin compromising the Gospel. We love because He first loved us. We live because Christ died for us. And so the reason for grace is not found in the depraved, dead sinner. It is found in God. And that brings us to the second point.

II. The Source of Pure Grace - “God”

Verse 16 says, “**For God so loved...**” This is amazing! We can understand the *wrath* of God that is mentioned in verse 36, *but God’s love for sinners?*! Nicodemus could have understood God’s hatred for sinners and loathing of sinners. As a Pharisee, he would have been well schooled in such Scriptures. Let me read you a few sample Scriptures which are the

truth, but if you take them apart from God's love you don't have the whole truth and you don't understand grace. Unfortunately the Pharisees took these verses out of context. They are one side of the truth.

Psalm 5:5 says of God, "**You hate all workers of iniquity.**" It doesn't just say that he hates the iniquity. It says that He hates all *workers* of iniquity. Proverbs 11:5-7: "**...the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates.**" He's not just hating the sin. Those verses say that He hates the *sinner*. Some people say, "Well, hate means that God loves them less." No. The next verse defines God's hatred by saying that hell is a sign of God's hatred for sinners and His love of righteousness. Proverbs 3:32: "**For the perverse *person* is an abomination to the LORD...**" An abomination is something detested or loathed, not loved. You loathe Satan, and rightfully so. That is how God loathes sinners. It says, "the perverse *person* is an abomination to the Lord." Not just his sin, but also his very existence. Prov. 6:16-19: "**...the LORD hates...a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.**" Deuteronomy 25:16: "**For all who do such things, and all who behave unrighteously, are an abomination to the LORD your God.**" So the real wonder of God's love is how He could conquer His hatred and have love for the world, no matter which of the eight definitions of world that you might give.

The wonder of this verse is that God, a holy God, could love even one sinner. This is what shows this to be pure grace. His love was not because we loved Him so much. It was founded on His grace alone.

III. The Motive for Pure Grace - "so loved"

But thirdly, this verse not only shows us the amazing source of this love - a holy God, but also that this grace was motivated by love. "**God so *loved*...**" There is a debate among scholars as to whether this should be translated: "**God *thus* loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son**", or whether it should be translated "**God *so* loved the world...**" There are good arguments for both translations, and I won't get into them. But it really doesn't matter. Whichever way you take it, it shows that God loved us enough to put His Son on the cross for us. This means that there could be no greater love that God could have for us.

Now to me this is incredibly encouraging. Why would God love us with the Greatest Love possible? It is because He loves us in the Son. When He looks at us, He sees Jesus. He sees His righteousness given to us. In other words, the love itself is grounded in grace.

As God sees sinners from eternity past as being elected in the Son, He can love them as intensely as He loves His only begotten Son. Romans 8:39 says that nothing “**shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**” That is where God’s love resides. It is in Christ Jesus our Lord. He loves Christ and therefore loves all who are united to Christ. That’s why Ephesians 1 discusses the electing love of God as being *in* Christ. The phrases “in Christ” or “in Him” or “in the Beloved” occur 16 times in those few verses in Ephesians 1. If God for even one moment considered us outside of Christ, He could not love us; we would be revolting in His sight and be cast away as Satan was. So even the motive is founded in undeserved grace. Love not only motivates His grace to us, but His love was made possible by grace. It is grace through and through.

IV. The Unworthy Object of Pure Grace - “the world”

But you say, “Wait a shake. This says that He loved the world.” Is the world loved by God going to be saved? That’s what verse 17 says. “**For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.**” God’s intention in sending His Son is nothing less than the salvation of the world. And here is where the Barthians misuse this Scripture. There is no question that whatever world is being spoken of in verses 16-17, God intends to save it and will save it. I think the Greek grammar is unmistakable. But the Barthian universalists make the same mistake that Arminians do. They separate the definition of “world” from belief. Verse 17 says that whatever world is in view, God did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Verse 18 says, “**He who believes in Him is not condemned...**” It is only through faith that condemnation can be avoided. He goes on – “**but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil...**” So it is obvious there is condemnation wherever there is unbelief. And the only way the world will not be condemned is if there is a believing world. Right?

How do we reconcile these verses with the ones we have already looked at? You can’t deny the Scriptures that say God hates and loathes the person of the wicked. You can’t deny the Scriptures that say that God can only love people as He sees them righteous in the Son. But neither can you deny that there is a hell. Here is how I explain the verse.

In your outline notes I have taken from a dictionary nine different definitions of world.¹ Three or four of them could fit here. For example, Romans 11:15 uses the term “world” to mean Gentiles as opposed to Jews. In arguing with a Pharisee this would make sense. That would be opposing Jewish exclusivism. And some Reformed scholars take it that way. What a shocker for a Pharisee to see this intense grace extended to Gentiles. *“Believing Gentiles!!!? They’re not worthy!”* And Jesus is saying, “You’re getting the point. You’re not worthy either.”

But there are other possible definitions of the word “world.” Several passages define it as planet earth, and even the ordered universe that Romans 8 says must enter into the redemption of Christ. God had to give His Son to redeem that world (or universe) as well. But the eschatological world is also a possibility - in other words, the world as God plans it. But whichever definition you take - and I don’t care, it shows that the object of God’s love is unworthy. That’s the staggering thing.

V. The Power of God’s Grace (“world that... that...”)

But that phrase also points to the power of God’s grace. Think of it this way: God did not give up on the world lost by Adam, but decided to save that world that was lost by Adam. 2 Corinthians 9:18 speaks of the reconciliation of the world to Christ: **“that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them...”** The world will not go to hell if their trespasses are not imputed to them. Then the next verse gives the means of that world being reconciled to God: **“and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us, we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.”** The world that God is reconciling isn’t reconciled yet. John 3:16 talks in the same way. It also talks of God’s saving love to the world and the means to that end - bringing people to faith. There is coming a time as I have preached many times when the whole world will be filled with righteousness as the waters cover the ocean-beds. God did not abandon the world and save only a few.

¹ Definition of “world” (Greek = *kosmos*)

1. root meaning is any “order” or “arrangement.” See “adorning” (*kosmos*) of hair and clothing in 1 Pet. 3:3.
2. Universe - Acts 17:24; Jn. 17:25; Eph. 1:4
3. earth - John 13:1; 21:25
4. mankind or society - Rev. 3:19; Jn. 16:21
5. realm of evil - 1 Jn. 2:15-17
6. non-elect (Jn. 17:9)
7. unbelievers (Jn. 15:18; Rom. 3:6; 2 Pet. 2:5)
8. Gentiles (Rom. 11:12)
9. eschatological world. ie. the redeemed planet & universe anticipated after all sin, sinners and curse is cast out of it (2 Cor. 5:19)

He will have saved the world and cast out sinners. What a power God's grace has to conquer a world at enmity with Him.

VI. The Progress and Victory of God's Grace - "the world"

So that phrase speaks of the unworthiness of the object of grace, and the power of God's grace to impact the world, but it also speaks of the progress and victory of God's grace. Romans 4:13 tells us that the promise to Abraham was not just Canaan, but "**the promise that he would be the heir of the world...**" Heir of the world; God so loved the world. Thus, 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 says, "**For all things are yours; whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come - all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.**" The world is yours because God has determined to save the world. And there are many Scriptures like this which point, not to Arminianism, but to the victory of Christ's grace in history. The unbelievers in Acts complained, "**they are turning the world upside down.**" It begins with only a few believers, it progresses into multitudes and myriads, and ends with the crumbling of Rome to Paul's gospel as members of Caesar's household become converted. That is an allusion to Daniel 2, which speaks, of Christ's kingdom as a stone that smites the Roman image and gradually takes over the world. Daniel 2:35 says, "**And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.**" God's love for the world shows not only that it is unworthy, and the power of God's grace to conquer the enmity we had against Him, but also the progress of grace to reconcile the world to Himself. Marvelous grace. Victorious grace. Grace, pure grace. Nothing but grace could achieve this.

VII. Monergistic Grace- "that he gave"

Point VII is a theological term that I didn't have a laymen's term for. Monergistic is made up of two words: mono which means one and ergo which is work. You could define it as "Only one who works." It simply means that the grace of God was a one way street from God to us. "**God so love the world that HE gave...**" It was *His* giving that made the difference, not anything *we* might give. And especially when we get to the phrase that relates to justification, it is important to realize that our works contributed nothing. Christ's works made it all. Salvation is a one-way street. It's not salvation by our faithfulness, but by God's faithfulness. In fact, our salvation is not even founded on our faith, since our faith is a gift of

God. It is founded 100% upon what Jesus Christ did for us by God's gift. It is monergistic.

VIII. Costly Grace - "gave His only begotten Son"

The eighth point is that it was a costly grace. "**He gave His only begotten Son.**" It ought to humble us to realize that God's one and only was the one who became flesh and suffered for us. The perfectly holy became sin for us. Without Christ, we could never have been loved. Without His perfect life being credited to our account, we could never have been accepted. Without His dying in our place, we could never have escaped eternal hell. The elect world (which is actually a tenth definition I should have included in your outline) was loved with the greatest possible love only because we were given the greatest possible gift and seen as perfect in Him. Can you worship Him? Can you praise Him for this great salvation? Though God's grace is free to us, it cost the Father a great deal. Thank you Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for Your great salvation!

IX. Confident Grace - "that whoever believes"

The next phrase, "**that whoever believes**", is a wonderful phrase! There have been those who have been fearful that they are not elect or that God does not love them. That is not for you to worry about. God's command is not to speculate on the secret things of God. God's command is to believe and follow. And the one who believes; *every* one who believes will never perish. In John 6 Jesus said, "**the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.**" By no means! Perhaps Satan has tempted you to think that you have committed the unpardonable sin. Tell Him, "No I haven't, because I believe, and God has promised to save forever those who believe." Tell Satan, "No I haven't, because I daily confess my sins, including the huge sin you keep throwing in my face, and the God who cannot lie has said, that if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And Satan will say, "Yeah, but your sin is so great!" And you need to ignore Him and repeat God's promise – "cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness." So this grace gives us confidence.

But what I especially want to focus on for this point is that *God speaks the promise* with the utmost confidence in His grace. In other words, it's not just our confidence, but also God's confidence. It's not some who believe, but "*whoever* believes" or literally, it is "every believing one in Him will not perish." God is confident in the power of His grace to keep us. And

it is good to ask, “Why is God so confident that whoever believes in Him will never perish?” Why is there no need to worry that a believer won’t later unbelieve? Why the dogmatic confidence? Well, the answer is simple. We’ve already seen that everything comes from God. The same is true of faith. If God is the only one who can cause us to believe, He is the only one who can keep us believing.

John 6:44 says, “**No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.**” If it’s only the Father’s drawing power that can enable us to come to Jesus, it is only the Father’s drawing power that can ensure that every one of those will be raised to glory. Hallelujah! John 6:65 says, “**no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.**” Acts 3:16 speaks of “**the faith which comes through Him.**” Acts 18:27 speaks of “**those who had believed through grace.**” To me this is incredible. It’s faith that lays hold of grace, but it is grace that enables us to even have faith to lay hold of grace. This is why Augustine, who lived in the late 300’s to the early 400’s AD said, “God’s mercy ... goes before the unwilling to make him willing; it follows the willing to make his will effectual.” Grace, pure grace. And without it, no one would believe. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “**But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.**”

It takes God’s powerful grace to bring people to believe. Philippians 1:29 says, “**For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.**” Ephesians 1:19 says, “**and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us, *who believe according to the working of His mighty power.***” Amazing grace. God speaks so confidently in this verse because it is impossible for God to begin a work that He does not finish. Grace grants saving faith and it grants persevering faith. In John 6 Christ said, “**No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw Him...All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, [and here comes the assurance to troubled souls] and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.**” Hallelujah! Praise Jehovah! O my soul, Jehovah praise! The words “whoever believes” are dogmatic words: words of confidence in God’s grace.

X. Christ Centered Grace - “believes in Him”

But John 3:16 also demonstrates a Christ-centered grace. It says whoever “**believes in *Him*.**” One definition of GRACE was God’s Riches

At Christ's Expense. Saving faith believes in Christ, not the church. It believes in Christ, not our works. It believes in Christ, not our faith. One of the mistakes I made in my early teens was to put faith in my faith. I doubted my salvation continually, wondering if I had repented well enough, or believed well enough in the past. Everybody was telling me to get assurance by looking back at my conversion. But it never gave me assurance. I didn't have a break-through until someone told me to quit having faith in my faith and to begin having faith in Jesus. And every time Satan tempts you to doubt because you aren't good enough, you look to Jesus and say that He is good enough. And every time Satan tempts you to think that your faith in the past was not good enough, tell him, "I don't care about the past. My faith is in Jesus right now, and it will stay in Jesus." There is nothing man-centered in this message. *He* is our justification.

XI. The Contrast to Grace - "should not perish"

The phrase "**should not perish**" speaks next of the contrast to grace, or what we deserve apart from God's grace. We deserve to perish. Universalists teach that no one will perish. Christ says that only believers will not perish. All others will perish. That is an issue that must not be ignored. Do you know for sure that you are going to heaven? If not, do not delay. Without a personal faith in Jesus Christ you will spend all eternity in hell. There are many who deny that God is a God of judgment, but if there is no judgment, then there is no need for mercy or for grace. Mercy is God's undeserved dropping of deserved judgment. Grace is God's undeserved giving of the opposite – heaven and all of His favors. And that's what I want to end with.

XII. The Eternality of Grace - "but have everlasting life."

The last phrase of the verse speaks to the eternality of grace – "**but have everlasting life.**" It doesn't say that they will have (future tense). No. They have it now (the Greek is the present tense). Any person, whether Reformed or not, who tells you that you will have eternal life if you are faithful and if you persevere, is messing with the message. The moment you have faith, you are justified, secure and already have that eternal life given to you. God's grace is forever. We will be held in it for eternity. For eternity we will be debtors - forever expressing our praise for what He has spared us from and what He has given to us.

It all centers on Jesus. Without Him there is no new birth, faith, salvation, heaven. To Nicodemus who was working for His salvation, Jesus said, “You must be worked upon. You must be born from above.” Jesus alone is the bridge between heaven and hell, and those who are saved by Him give Him glory knowing it is all of grace, pure grace. Amen.

Conclusion

The Lord’s charge comes from 1 Timothy 1:4 and Galatians 5:1. Children of God, I charge you that since the grace of our Lord is exceedingly abundant (1 Timothy 1:14), that you “**Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.**” (Gal. 5:1) Amen.

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