

May 4, 2014
Community Baptist Church
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 3:16a.

1. Describe what the little conjunction “for” does in this clause.
2. Contrast human love with God’s love.
3. What would you say is the greatest difference between human love and God’s love?
4. In what various ways can we show God’s love to others?

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3:16

We come now to what is possibly the greatest statement in the Bible. This one verse so encapsulates the wonder of the gospel, that if this simple statement is all of the Bible that a sinner ever heard, it would be sufficient for him or her to gain salvation by faith.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). It is such a simple statement that it was one of the first Bible verses we memorized as children. The Greek vocabulary and syntax are about as basic as the Greek language can be. And yet the truth conveyed by the verse is so profound that we would not be able to exhaust it in a lifetime of meditation.

To that end, it is fitting for us to slow down and take our time as we study this part of John’s letter. We need to savor every word—literally. Therefore we will consider this verse in three

separate studies over the next three weeks. Today, let’s ponder the depth and wonder of this truth, “God so loved the world.”

For

This connecting conjunction is the Greek word *gar*. As a conjunction, it expresses assurance regarding the previous discussion. Jesus assured Nicodemus that he must be born again. In an abrupt and unexpected response, Jesus told the teacher of Israel that unless he was born again, he would never experience eternal life (i.e. enter the kingdom of God). This had to be a shock to a person who assumed he would be among the first to enter the kingdom. This stipulation is a shock to most people who give serious thought to how they are going to get into heaven. While it is true that multitudes of people seem to give little serious thought to eternity, there are times when most people consider the problem and wonder what they can do about it.

Jesus’ certain statement to the teacher should have unsettled him so much that he would begin to question his confidence about eternal life. That appears to be exactly what happened. In response to Jesus’ affirmation that Nicodemus “had to be born again” (no ifs ands or buts), the teacher asked a hard question. Though the man’s question about an old man entering his mother’s womb seems a bit sarcastic, it does express his incredulity.

Now Jesus will drive home the certainty of that need. To clear up any lingering doubt, in this simple statement of our text (as well as the conversation that follows), Jesus drove home the central point of the question. The need to be born again is not arrived at deductively, through logical conclusions, or through a process of sequential arguments. You must be born again because God said so! The little word “for” will make the connection with the assurance of this truth.

Also, the word *for* is a conjunction that explains the preceding. Jesus briefly explained and illustrated new birth for Nicodemus. As Jesus taught Nicodemus, He taught all of us, that being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit (being a spirit) is invisible, His work of regeneration must be observed through consequent effects. It is the same way we observe the work of the wind which is also invisible.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' explanation of the new birth was difficult for Nicodemus to grasp, just like it is difficult for all humans to grasp. If there is someone who hears the gospel for the first time and flippantly concludes, "Okay, that sounds good. Let's pray," there is a pretty good chance that the person's response was indeed flippant. The essential message of the gospel is that we all are natural born sinners who offend our Creator incessantly. We must have a payment for that sin offered to us. The Creator Himself offered us the payment by having sinners kill the unique Son of God. Everyone who truly believes that, and proves faith by embracing that payment, will experience the new birth. And human nature responds like the guy on the Arby's fish sandwich commercial, "Really?"

"For" makes the connection in that now, in verse sixteen, Jesus will explain the foundational truth of the new birth. "For" introduces the most exact expression of the new birth story. In the words that follow, Jesus drove right to the heart of the gospel. The gospel is the story about why we must be born again. The little word "for" is like a key that unlocks the lock and opens the door wide open so that we can see, to our utter amazement, what God has done and why He has done it.

God so Loved

Two of these three words give the subject and the verb of the sentence. Love is the verb. It's what God does. It is such a human emotion. Well of course it is! But that is a problem since all humanity is tarnished by sin. It happened like this: Satan refused to trust God and depend on God. He had a better plan than God. His heart was lifted up within him and he decided to replace God. Isaiah captured the gist of the fall when he declared, *How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High"* (Isaiah 14:12-14).

Having fallen into sin himself, Satan convinced Eve and Adam to follow his distrust of God. He lied to Eve who in turn disobeyed

God. Then, with eyes wide open, Adam also refused to depend on God. They brought sin crashing into creation because they chose to be self-willed and self-centered. Sin, which is rooted in self-centeredness, quickly expressed itself when Cain refused to "love" his brother Abel. So being selfish, he killed him. And so the spinning wheel of sinful self-centeredness has continued to spin round and round every hour of every day since then. We all want to be happy, fulfilled, content, satisfied, and feel good about ourselves. We have been taught that only we can determine what happiness, fulfillment, contentment, satisfaction, and self-esteem means for us. Because this is true, how do we think that we can understand or express genuine love naturally?

Human love is an expression of self-love. When we desire love for ourselves, we want to be accepted by others or by someone. We want someone to make a commitment to us. We want our desires (emotional, physical) to be met by someone(s). We want to feel good about ourselves so that our self-esteem is at an acceptable level. In worse case scenarios, we want to control someone or something or we want to own someone or something.

So listen to the arguments of immature "would-be" adults. "If you really loved me you would _____." Fill in the blank. "Lose weight?" "Buy me a new house?" "Stop going to the bar?" "Go to church with me?" As noble and even religious as those arguments sound, are they not all personal desires intended to bring the individual satisfaction or a sense of commitment made to the one wanting to be loved?

Even when we express love to others, our love is tainted by fallen human nature. The social architects of our culture, who seem to be firmly in control at the time, define and illustrate the common expressions of love toward others. They say that we need to take money from the rich (which in reality means you and me) and give it to the poor (which in reality means people who choose not to work). We must do this because we are supposed to love the needy. These thought police and public controllers are even so bold as to quote Jesus on this matter. Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*" (Matthew 5:7). "*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well*" (Matthew 5:40). "*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what*

your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:3-4). “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Great conclusions from Jesus notwithstanding, we are left to wonder who is responsible to determine what constitutes “need” and, therefore, what constitutes “love”? If we come to such important conclusions based solely on human wisdom, which is thoroughly infected by sin, have we arrived at an accurate conclusion? Because we are infected by sin, we cannot begin to correctly fulfill God’s first command if we do not think outside the box of human wisdom.

This reality came to light when, *one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:35-39).*

The great command and the second command are clearly stated. But we cannot love God with our entire heart, soul, and mind if we love ourselves first and foremost. We cannot love God with the entirety of our being if we love ourselves at all. This command requires us to be “un-human.” It is only possible to begin to understand this command after regeneration as we are helped by the Holy Spirit to recognize self-love.

Likewise, if our understanding of love is human centered, we will attempt to show our neighbors the kind of love we desire to be shown to us. A human-kind of love will seek to make our neighbors like us because it is how we love ourselves. That kind of love will desire for our neighbors to have things like a nice home, nice clothes, good food, a good car, all the latest electronic gadgets (like free cell phones), and a free education through college. That kind of love desires for our neighbors to feel good about themselves, to have high self-esteem, to be happy about life. Is that not the level at which humans love themselves?

However, our culture has proven that showing that kind of love to our neighbors has not helped them at all. It has too often made lazy, foolish, fleshly, and unhealthy the very people we thought to

help. Loving with human-centered love cannot be what God envisioned when He told us that the great command is to love Him supremely and to love our neighbors like we love ourselves. What alternative do we have? Learn from God.

True love is God’s desire expressed. This has to be the case because God our Creator is love. Scripture clearly articulates this truth. John wrote, *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:8). In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10). So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16).*

Our conscience resonates with this truth. Because God has written His law on our conscience, we know that He is love. That is why even unsaved people argue for the fact that God is love. Some people who do not even believe there is a God claim that if He did exist, He would be loving. Don’t ask me to explain that paradox.

But when we try to superimpose human kind of love on God (i.e. the kind infected by selfishness), we run into some serious conflicts. For example, people want to know why there is a hell if God is love? If God is love, why are there natural disasters? I have to admit that there were moments in the past week when there was a brief conflict in my soul. I watched people on the news throughout the South being interviewed after tornados wiped out their towns, wrecked their homes, and killed several people. Often the testimony of the survivors was to thank God for His care and protection. But something in my heart recoiled because I know that the God they thank is the God who controls the weather. How could the loving God even allow a destructive tornado? If God is love, why is there suffering and sickness? If God is love, why does His Bible promise judgment against sin? If God is love, why was there a Holocaust? In other words, “How can God be love if He does not make me feel good about myself?”

Our understanding of love must flow from God’s character. God is perfectly holy. He is incomprehensibly separate from any taint of sin. Therefore, His expressions of love are going to be perfect, not centered in the faults of fallen humanity. That is why *agapei* love is unique (*agapei* being a Greek word translated “love”). We call it the

distinctly Christian love because it is seldom found in classical Greek, but it appears all through the New Testament. It is unique love because it must of necessity be love like God loves. Therefore, we define *agapei* love like this: It is a conscious decision to do the very best for the recipient even if it requires sacrifice. Applied to God, the definition might better say: Love is God's desire for the recipients of His grace, mercy, and kindness to achieve His perfection (the very best) even if it requires Him to sacrifice.

In other words, when God the Creator loves, He desires for all of His creation to know Him and become like Himself because He knows that only in this will the creature be truly happy. As one writer put it, "The love of God for sinners is not His making much of them, but His graciously freeing and empowering them to enjoy making much of Him." (John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, Wheaton, Ill." Crossway Books, 1998, p.34-35)

The World

The world is the direct object of the clause that receives the action of the verb. God desires for His entire creation to achieve the very best. What is that? Consider the fact that God created all things in a state of perfection. At the moment of creation, everything was "good." For example, God observed His creation of light and concluded that it was *good* (Gen. 1:4). The adjective "good" describes that which is right, appropriate, or pleasant. It is something that is practically, abstractly, morally, and technically superior. In the case of creation, it describes perfection—which means that the light could not have been better, more fitting, or more right.

Then, God observed the dry land and water of the earth He created and concluded that it was good (Gen. 1:10). God observed all the plants He created on earth and concluded that it was good (Gen. 1:12). God observed the heavenly lights and planets He created and concluded that it was good (Gen. 1:18). God observed all the creatures or animals of the sea, air, and land that He created and concluded that it was good (Gen. 1:18-21). In essence, that is the story of the entire creation process. *And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Genesis 1:31)*. The term

"everything" had to include humanity and all of the angelic beings, which included Satan.

Satan sinned, fell from perfection, and took the whole creation with him. Sin brought God's curse against the entire creation. Everything changed so that the entire universe is now subject to entropy and the laws of thermodynamics which reveal that everything is dying. So the cycle of life is birth—a life fraught with trials—sorrow, pain—leading to death. People do their best to find some satisfaction, some happiness, some meaning or purpose to life, only to realize that it ends in death. That is the curse of sin. People long for a way out of the curse. The entire creation longs for an end of the curse. Paul wrote, *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Romans 8:22)*.

God's plan is to redeem the entire creation from the disaster of sin. The end of the story is foretold in *the Revelation*. After Christ had revealed all the tribulation by which God purges the creation of sin, and after He showed a glimpse of the eternal state, John heard God speak: *And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Revelation 21:5)*. God's plan is working steadily toward the final redemption of the fallen creation.

But for there to be redemption, there must be a Redeemer. Jesus Christ is the Redeemer because He is the Lamb who was slain. It is He who steps forward in heaven (as John saw in Rev. 5) to take the scroll, the title deed to all creation. He is worthy to redeem because with His blood He paid the ransom. *And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9-10)*.

From this verse, we discover that God's special focus in bringing the whole creation back to perfection is people. When God loves the world, He especially focuses on people. God especially desires for His image to achieve the very best. When I substitute a name (like my name) for the direct object in this clause, basic grammar suddenly gets very exciting.

God created humans to reflect His own glory. That is what the phrase *He created us in His image* means. That is not said of any other part of creation. God created Adam and Eve (and therefore all of us in succession) to reflect Himself. He endowed us with certain and many of His own traits. If we were perfect, everyone would see an accurate reflection of God in us. We are not and they do not. Jesus was the only perfect human and what did He say to Philip who asked Him to show God the Father? *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"* (John 14:9).

Though God created us in His image, we are very marred images by nature. Because of sin, we do not reflect an accurate image of God or His glory. How can those who are His enemies give an accurate representation of Him? To conclude that we are not perfect any longer is an understatement of the highest degree.

God desires for humans to be perfect. We are not at all like God's standard of perfection. It is no surprise to God that we are not very much like Him. He is the One who laid down the curse that reveals how marred we really are. But He is also the One who gave the provision so that we can be perfect. To say that a flawed and faltering human who is at odds with our perfect Creator can be like Him is a remarkable statement. God put within our souls the longing to be what He created us to be. Are we left to experience only frustration because of that truth? No. Because God has the desire for us to have the very best, He has made the ultimate sacrifice to make that end possible. We who have heard the good news, we who have by faith embraced the wonderful story that God loves the world long desperately to arrive at that state of perfection. So we agree with Paul who also wrote, *And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies* (Romans 8:23).

God, desiring for His creation to have the very, very best, (i.e. His own perfection), and God sacrificing so that we can have that, is what the gospel is all about. God pours out all of His kindness, mercy, compassion, and grace toward this end: That His creation might be redeemed to its original state of perfection. Specifically, God patiently offers evidence on top of evidence of common grace so

that your neighbor and co-worker will trust Christ and be redeemed from sin. Most specifically, God pours out His mercy, grace, and kindness on me because He desires for me to achieve the very best—His own standard of perfection! If that isn't the best expression of love, we will never understand love.