

John 3:1-21

How the Bread and the Cup Preach Jn. 3:16

When it comes to dealing with the most well known verse in all the Bible – I’ve found myself thankful for commentaries that can help me convey the power of this text. One commentator sums it up best when he writes:

What proclamation of the Gospel has been so oft on the lips of missionaries and preachers in every age since it was first uttered? What has sent such thrilling sensations through millions of mankind? What has been honored to bring such multitudes to the feet of Christ? What to kindle in the cold and selfish breasts of mortals the fires of self-sacrificing love to mankind, as these words of transparent simplicity, yet overpowering majesty?

It is undoubtedly because of this transparent simplicity and overpowering majesty that you can find this verse in a large assortment of places. You can find it printed on tee-shirts or coffee mugs. You may find it printed on billboards. You can find the mere reference written out on a placard and held up behind home plate in many a baseball game so that the TV camera can’t dodge it. One might argue that it’s the most concise and effective verse for a Christian to have at his disposal when it comes to evangelism. And when we think of Jn. 3:16 I suppose we quite naturally place it under the heading of evangelism.

In its context you could say it’s being used by Christ Himself for an evangelistic purpose as Christ explains the gospel to Nicodemus. It certainly suits John’s purpose in writing this gospel which is given to us in Jn 20:31 *But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*

This is the thrust of John 3:16 – that you might believe. The statement about God’s love and God giving His Son is sandwiched between two statements that call on us to believe – *The son of man must be lifted up* Christ says in v. 14 *that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life* – v. 15. And then Christ goes on to say – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Do you see how the emphasis in verses 15 & 16 is on believing? John wants his readers to believe in Christ. He wants them to gain the benefit of everlasting life that comes through believing in Christ. *These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*

What a compelling case is made then by the words of Jn. 3:16 in order to persuade us to believe. God gave His Son – Christ is saying. God loved the world in such a way that He was willing to make the greatest sacrifice conceivable to the mind of God. What greater sacrifice could be made than the giving of His Son? And if the greatness of His love is measured in terms of what He was willing to give – then we may truly confess that there is no greater love than this.

And the greatness of that love becomes all the more apparent when you consider what you are. Are you the worthy recipient of such love? Did God send His Son because you deserved

His Son? Hardly – You and I were *condemned already* – to use the phrase in v. 18. We were *perishing* to use the term in v. 16. One Greek lexicon says of this term *perish* that metaphorically it means – *to devote or give over to eternal misery in hell*.

But instead of giving us over to eternal misery in hell – God instead gave His Son. It's no wonder that hymn writers struggle with a sense of inadequacy when it comes to expressing the love of God.

*Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above, Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Tho' stretched from sky to sky.*

Hymn writers may struggle to express it – and yet what a sublime simplicity underlies the way Christ said it – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life*.

The verse is a favorite for evangelists – preaching to unsaved multitudes. And yet it's a verse that Christians need to have reaffirmed time and again in their own hearts and lives. When your heart is overflowing with praise and you marvel at the goodness of God on a summer evening when the breeze is refreshing and sky is clear you can hear that still small voice of God's Spirit saying – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*. When doubts and fears press you sore and the outcome of some trial is hidden from you – you have need to be reminded that *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*. When you don't know which way is forward and weighty decisions are upon your mind you need to hear it again – *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*.

This morning the thing I want to impress upon you is that the message of Jn. 3:16 is conveyed to you by the elements that make up the Lord's table. The bread and the cup vividly portray that message and before we partake of the Lord's table today I would like to share with you:

How the Bread and the Cup Preach to us the Message of John 3:16

Let's look at the text, then, in the order in which it is revealed by considering first:

I. God's Love – *for God so loved...*

This is one of John's favorite truths. He makes it a point of emphasis. We find the term *love* mentioned 3 times as often in John's gospel than any of the other gospels. In fact that term occurs more in John's gospel than in all the other gospels combined. It is in our text that we find it mentioned for the first time in John's gospel. In our text the reference regards God's love for the world. We also find mention of:

The Father's love for His Son – 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9

This is a point in John's gospel that we should not overlook for it helps us to measure God's love for us. How much does God love you? Can you measure it? Paul tells us that it's

length and breadth and depth and height go beyond knowledge. It is beyond our comprehension. We are, however given a measuring rod of sorts of Christ's love toward us in Jn. 15:9 *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.* This measuring rod doesn't bring Christ's love within the realm of our comprehension but it does serve to show us something of it's length and breadth and depth and height. Christ loves us as his Father loves Him. This should put the question of God's love beyond all doubt and dispute. If the Father's love for His Son is a perfect love – then Christ's love for you is a perfect love. If the Father's love for His Son is a complete love – lacking in nothing – then Christ's love for you is the same. If the Father's love for His Son is a durable love that never ends – then His love for you is no less.

Perhaps more to the point of our time around this table is the statement we find of the Father's love for His Son in Jn. 10:17. We see one of the reasons given why the Father loves His Son – it's a reflection of the Father's love toward you and toward me – Jn. 10:17 *Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.*

Christ's willingness to lay down His life gained His Father's love. Can you not see in that statement the implication of the Father's love toward you? Because of Christ's willingness to take to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul – His Father loved Him. Because of His willingness to give that body to be broken and to allow His blood to be shed – His Father loved Him. Because of His willingness to redeem you to His Father – His Father loved Him.

One of the things you must bear in mind when you contemplate the love of Christ is how that love is reciprocated between the Father and the Son. Christ, you see, showed His love toward His Father by His obedience unto death. Listen to what He says in Jn. 14:31 *But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do.* Christ's love for His Father is demonstrated, then, by His obedience. Christ's purpose in coming into this world was not only to redeem you to Himself but He would declare to the world that He loved His Father. And He makes this declaration by His obedience even unto death. And for that reason His Father loves Him. You and I, then, are the beneficiaries of this love between the Father and the Son.

Now our text tells us that God so loved the world. The grace behind this statement becomes all the more magnified when you consider that the world stood condemned before God. Verse 17 tells us that *God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world.* That would not have been necessary – the world was already condemned. *He that believeth not is condemned already* – v. 18 tells us. It doesn't say that the unbeliever will be condemned – the verse says that he's already condemned. John the Baptist conveys the same truth when he says in the very last verse of the chapter – *he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him* (v. 36).

The wrath of God this very moment is abiding on him. It's the same truth expounded by Paul in Romans when he writes – Rom. 1:18 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;* In contrast therefore to what this sinful world deserved – God instead demonstrated His love.

Now both of these truths – God’s wrath toward the world and God’s love for the world are portrayed in the elements of the Lord’s table. The bread bears witness to Christ’s humanity. In His love He became the Son of man. Because of God’s wrath toward sin – His body was broken. From a heart of love He shed His blood. In the justice of God’s wrath He shed His blood. So we read this prophetic statement of Christ in *Zec 13:7 Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man [that is] my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.* This is why the Lord’s table both humbles us while at the same time assures us that God so loved the world. Let the bread and cup preach to you therefore that God judges sin and that God redeems sinners. See in these signs wonderful testimonials of God’s love to you. This sacrament is designed by God in order for each of you individually to personalize the message of God’s love to your own soul. I think the statement in *Jn. 13:1* expresses the love of Christ best when it says: *Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.*

This love becomes all the more apparent when we consider next:

II. The Action of God’s Love – *for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*

It is interesting and helpful to note in John’s gospel the interaction between Christ and His Father. This interaction comes out more fully in John’s gospel than anywhere else in the New Testament. We have seen already the interaction of the Father’s love for His Son and the Son’s love for His Father. Christ loves His Father – and thus renders obedience to His Father. The Father loves His Son because of His Son’s willingness to render that obedience. You and I enter into the love of the Father and the Son because of their love for each other.

When we ponder the action of God’s love in giving – we may note a number of things that the Father gave to His Son.

He gave or He communicated to His Son the essence of deity. We find a statement in *John 5* that shows us the essence of Christ’s deity as well as His relationship to His Father when we read in *v. 26 For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself.* This is one of the wonders of the trinity and it is the meaning behind the statement *God’s only begotten Son.* The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. There is a communicated essence that makes Christ a source of life in Himself. This is one of the weaknesses of modern translations – that they lose the theological significance of Christ being God’s only begotten Son. The modern versions cater to theological ignorance as well as a lack of interest in the wonders of the Godhead when they substitute the phrase *one and only* for *God’s only begotten Son.*

But we can go a step further and say that God gave to His Son a commandment. In fact you could say that Christ’s work was His Father’s commandment. All that He said and did was in accordance to the commandment His Father gave Him. And so we read in *Jn. 14:31 But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do.* And again in *Jn. 17:4 I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work*

which thou gavest me to do. The work and the commandment are the same. Both were given by the Father to the Son.

Christ's Father also gave to Christ the very words that Christ would convey to His followers. So we read in Jn. 17:8 – *For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received [them], and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me.* And again in v. 14 of that same chapter – *I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.*

You are, of course, familiar with the many times in John 17 that we read that among the things Christ's Father gave Him – we see that His Father gave Him a people:

- Joh 17:2 *As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.*
- Joh 17:9 *I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.*
- Joh 17:11 *And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we [are].*
- Joh 17:24 *Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.*

These are a few of the things, then, that the Father gave to His Son. He gives Him a communicated essence. He gave Him a commandment. He gave Him a work to do. He gave Him the words to speak. He gave Him a people to be His upon the successful completion of that work.

I should also mention the fact that Christ's Father gave to Christ a cup to drink – Jn. 18:11 *Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?* Christ has given us a cup to drink this morning that is designed to bring to our minds the cup that His Father gave Him to drink on our behalf. The reference is of course to Christ's sufferings. He was apprehended and mocked and scourged and spit upon and eventually nailed to a cross. That was His cup to drink. His Father's wrath was unleashed upon Him which was our due – that was His cup to drink. He was taken from that cross and was laid in a tomb as a part of the cup that was given Him to drink. These are a few of the things that we memorialize when we drink of the cup that He's given us to drink.

But think with me now on the things that are given to you as a result of the things that were given to Christ:

You have been given power (authority) to become a son of God (Jn. 1:12). The very faith that is required for salvation has been given to you – Jn. 6:65 *And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.* You

have been given everlasting life. Because the good shepherd *giveth His life for His sheep* (Jn. 10:11) – Christ could say in v. 28 of that same chapter – *and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand*. It is in the light of what Christ accomplished by His broken body and shed blood that He could say in Jn. 14:27 *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid*.

He gives us life – He gives us peace – He gives us power – He gives us faith – He gives us His Spirit – all because His Father gave Him to the world. God’s love can most plainly be seen then, in what He gave and by what He gives.

He gives us this table that we may draw near to Him to find renewal and refreshment to our souls. We must understand the spiritual meaning of His words when He says in { **Jn. 6:51-56** }.

We’ve seen, then, something of the action of His love. We can strive to measure His love by contemplating what He gave and what He gives. This table reminds us that He gave His body for you – and that He shed His blood for you. It remains for us to consider finally:

III. Our Response To God’s Love –

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Our response must be the response of faith. It is ours to believe – The bread calls us to believe that God gave His only begotten Son. It calls us to believe that He gave His body to be broken for our salvation. The cup calls on us to believe that the giving of His life amounts to the shedding of His blood.

It was through the shedding of His blood, you see, that He poured out His life in all its value and virtue and made satisfaction to God’s justice. The bread and the cup together call on us to believe that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The blessing of our time around this table this morning is that it affords us the opportunity to declare to God and to testify among ourselves that we do believe.

I love the refrain to one of the versions in our hymnbook of *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*. At the end of each stanza we sing – *I do believe, I will believe, That Jesus died for me: That on the cross He shed His blood From sin to set me free*.

We can make that pledge today by partaking of these elements. We can say to God and to Christ – *I do believe, I will believe that Jesus died for me*. What a wonderful occasion is ours then of expressing our faith in worship to Him who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

May you feel the Spirit’s wooing as He reminds you of God’s love to you – and may you be enabled to respond to His wooing with a heart of faith that says *I believe* and *Thank you Lord for saving my soul*.