

“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD”

John 3:14-21

I remember this as if it happened only yesterday. My son Andrew, four-years-old at the time, climbed into the family minivan with crumpled artwork in one small hand and a Power Rangers backpack dangling from the other. “Daddy,” he said, grinning, “I learned a new song at school today. Wanna hear it?” “Sure I do,” I replied. “Let’s hear it.” And without any fear of forgetting the lyrics or missing the notes, Andrew began: “I love you a bushel and a peck, a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck.” The song ended with my four-year-old son giving me a peck on the cheek and a hug around the neck.

Were you to ask Andrew today about this preschool episode, he would likely say, “Nah, that never happened. Dad is losing his memory as rapidly as he’s losing his hair.” But it did happen. I could never lose or confuse a memory that precious. “I love you a bushel and a peck, a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck.”

It’s difficult to imagine a more powerful or uplifting expression than “I love you”. Yet, what does the expression really mean? Philosophers and poets, lyricists and songwriters, have attempted to define love for millennia. The definition can range from serious commitment to mild infatuation—from “I love my spouse” to “I love hamburgers and hotdogs.” And to make matters more challenging, there are different types of love: parental love; marital love; romantic love; brotherly love; friendship love; even puppy love.

Scripture is overflowing with expressions of God’s love. Jeremiah 31:3, **“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I**

have drawn you with loving-kindness.” Or the heartwarming words of Psalm 103: He **“crowns you with love and compassion,”** verse 4; the **“LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love,”** verse 8; for **“as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him,”** verse 11. Yet, what does God mean when He says “I love you”? What kind of love is God’s love? While the answer is given from Genesis to Revelation, nowhere is it more eloquently stated than in John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world.”**

When we hear this phrase, **“God so loved the world,”** we almost immediately equate “so loved” with “so much.” God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son. This is certainly true. However, a more literal rendering of the Greek is “in this manner God so loved the world.” So John 3:16 not only describes the extent of God’s great love, but the characteristics of God’s great love. What are those characteristics?

In answering, let’s begin with God’s language of love. The New Testament was written in Greek; and ancient Greek used three words to describe love, each with a different meaning: PHILOS, EROS, and AGAPE. PHILOS is the love of devoted friendship. Jesus used this word in John 13, saying to His disciples, **“You are my friends, if you do what I command.”** EROS, while not used in the Bible, is the love of romanticism and intimacy.

AGAPE is the highest form of love, far transcending emotion to embrace deep, unshakable commitment. It is a **complete love**, not lacking in any area or resource. It is a **determined love**, incapable of letting go or giving up. It is a **sacrificial love**, willing to expend self in service to others. It is a **purposeful love**, focused not on want but on true need. It is a **perfect love**, used in John 3:35 to describe the perfect love of God the Father for God the Son, and in John 14:35 to describe the

perfect love of God the Son for God the Father. As someone has said, ‘AGAPE is the type of love that recognizes everything wrong with someone and yet insists on loving that person anyway.’ This is God’s great love for the world. This, dear friend, is God’s great love for you.

And while there are scores of Bible passages that describe the characteristics of this highest form of love, AGAPE, one of the most endearing is found in 1 Corinthians 13: **“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”** Patient; that is God’s love. Kind, that is God’s love. Not self-seeking; that is God’s love. Always protecting and persevering; that is God’s love.

John 3:16 is one of the first Bible verses I memorized as a child. It is also one of the first verses I taught my own children. To this day, whenever I worry about their wellbeing, happiness, contentment, and safety—whether physical or spiritual—I remind them, “Remember John 3:16. Remember that **‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’**” This simple verse encapsulates the entire Gospel. If you knew no other message from God, believing this message alone would bring you eternal salvation.

Despite the global scope of the message, **“God so loved the world,”** remember that Jesus delivered this powerful description of God’s love and salvation to one individual—to Nicodemus who, as John explains in the third chapter of his Gospel, was a Pharisee and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin; a man drawn to Jesus, but who still had doubts about Jesus; a man

so worried and frightened about what others would think that he came to Jesus at night.

As Jesus so often did, He taught the great love of God to lost and confused individuals, not just massive crowds. So, think of yourself as a Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night; worried, upset, concerned about everything from personal affairs to the affairs of the country. Perhaps you are facing a serious illness. Perhaps your marriage is in trouble. Perhaps you're in pain or lonely or in search of a job or struggling to pay bills; and more than anything else you desire to know the certainty of God's love at work in your life; the certainty that God has not turned away from you or forgotten you, but rather loves you with all His heart. Approach Jesus this way, and then listen carefully to what He tells you.

First, God's love is an unconditional love. “For God so loved the world,” Jesus said. The Greek word for world is cosmos; and it incorporates all the glitter, worldliness, and self-interest contained in the word cosmopolitan. What kind of a world did God love? A lost and condemned world. A world that hated Him, as Paul describes in Romans 1:29-30, “**They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.**”

This is the world God loved; a world that failed to recognize the long-promised Savior, as John wrote in his Gospel Record: “**He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him,**” John 1:10-11.

My son Andrew enjoys playing “stump the pastor” as much as anyone, and often corners me in the car with a deep theological question. One of his favorites involves Genesis 3 and the fall into sin. “Well dad,” he says, hoping this time I will see the inevitability of his logic; “if God knew Adam and Eve would sin, why did He create them?” And I usually answer his question with a question of my own: “If God knew Adam and Eve would sin, why did He choose to save them, knowing that saving them would cost the life of His only begotten Son?” The answer is, because God loved them and the world to be born from them. When creating an entire universe was not enough to demonstrate God’s love, He sacrificed His own Son, Jesus Christ.

Is this the course we would take? Not a chance. We switch phone companies over poor customer service. We give up on people who fail to meet our expectations. We stop patronizing restaurants where the food was cold. And yet, the Gospel brings us the amazing words: **“God so loved the world.”** This sinful, unworthy world and everyone in it. You. Me. Everyone. God’s love is unconditional, meaning that it does not depend on us but entirely on Him. And oh how different God’s love is from human love.

Human love looks for a reason to love. “I love because he is my child. I love because she meets all my needs. I love because he is so handsome.” Really? If that is true, how much will you love him when he grows old and wrinkled and his hair falls out? God loves us for His own sake. Can you think of anything more comforting than that? Can you see why all the despised and rejected, the outcasts and notorious sinners of Christ’s day were so overjoyed when Jesus proclaimed God’s love and forgiveness to them? Being saved had nothing to do with social status or nice clothes or good deeds or large bank accounts. Being saved simply meant trusting in God’s unconditional love, as revealed in Jesus Christ, **“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”**

Second, God’s love is a love of commitment and action and sacrifice. “God so loved the world that HE GAVE His only begotten Son.” He acted. And what did He give? The very best that He had to give, His own Son. I find it both sad and amazing that so many churches today want to talk about God’s love—though seldom mention a word about sin or accountability or cost. “Oh, God loves you,” they say, failing to realize that the only way to truly understand the extent of God’s love is through the extent of His sacrifice and the enormity of our sin. **“This is how we know what love is,”** John wrote in his First Epistle: **“Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.”** 1 John 3:16.

Truthfully, nothing flows more easily from human lips than the words “I love you.” I read a story recently about a young man who professed to love a young woman, and so wrote her a long letter filled with poetic expressions of love. “For you,” he said, “I would cross the hottest desert. I would swim the deepest ocean. I would brave the fiercest storm. I would climb the highest mountain. Such is my great, undying love for you. P.S.: I won’t be over this Saturday. The forecast is for snow.”

Over the course of their forty-eight-year marriage, I heard my dad and stepmother tell each other “I love you” countless times. But when I saw my stepmother sitting for hours beside my dad’s hospital bed, or gently holding his hand, or swabbing his tongue with ice chips, or adjusting the oxygen mask, or bending through a maze of tubes to kiss his forehead, there was no need for her to say “I love you.” I could see her love by her actions.

Does God say “I love you?” Of course He does. But He didn’t stop with mere talk. He proved that love in a way that should eliminate all doubt, all fear, and all worry. He gave His Son, Jesus Christ. He gave, not partially, tentatively, or regrettably, but completely and irrevocably. When God sacrificed Jesus for us, He was declaring His love for us to be irrevocable. He was saying to each one of us, “You might feel alone, but I am

always with you. You might feel lost, but I've saved you. You might feel unloved and unwanted, but no one will ever want or love you like I do. If you want proof, look at the cross. Look at the cross where I punished my Son so that I could save you."

The apostle Paul clearly saw the cross of Jesus as the indisputable proof of God's love. He wrote in Romans 8: **"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Third and finally, God's love is an eternal love. Have there been times in your life when you've thought, "How can God continue to love me? He's helped me in so many ways over the years. He's been there for me. Surely, His love for me must be running out by now—especially given all the times I've accepted His kindnesses, and then turned my back on Him to pursue my own desires and pleasures, that is, until I needed Him again." Have you ever felt this way? Yes, I have too.

And so did the apostle Paul. One can hear the humility and gratitude in his words, as he contemplated how loving and forgiving God had been throughout his life. He said, **"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance**

and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst,” 1 Timothy 1:12-15.

God’s love for you is unchanging, inexhaustible, and constant. This is important to remember. When we go through difficult times, our first thought is often: “God doesn’t love me very much. If God loved me, this would not be happening to me.” Oh, how wrong such assumptions are. God isn’t for us one day and against us the next. God doesn’t get moody or sleepy. God doesn’t love us a certain way today and a different way tomorrow. He loves us the same every day. He loves us in our good times, and He is still loving us when we go through bad times.

These are the characteristics of God’s great love. His love is an unconditional love. His love is a love of commitment and sacrifice. His love is an eternal love. So we say with Isaac Watts in his great hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a tribute far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.”