

August 24, 2008

“The Love of God”  
John 3:16-21

FCF: Not believing God loves us (and its effects upon us)

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Because God has loved us so in His Son,  
(anchor) we should trust His Son to save us.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

A factory employee named Kenneth worked for the largest manufacturer in Illinois for 24 years. His wages and benefits were double what the average factory job paid. He had steady work. He was 44 years old and had never attended a union meeting. He was a contented worker – until 1992. From 1992 until 1994 you could find Kenneth at the end of the day shift parading through the factory, holding an American flag along with two other workers, chanting, “*No contract. No peace. No contract. No peace.*”

What turned this once contented worker into a thorn in this manufacturer’s side? The turning point came in 1992, after the union had been on strike for nearly six months, when the company threatened to replace its striking workers. That did something to Kenneth. It turned him bitterly against his company. Kenneth angrily explained, “*I finally realized...when they threatened to replace us, that as far as they are concerned, I am nothing to them.*” I am nothing to them – Kenneth’s whole attitude changed when he concluded, rightly or wrongly, that he had no worth to the company, that he was replaceable, that they didn’t care about him. That changed him. There is a change that comes when you know you have value, that you matter. And when you think you don’t.

How about you? Do you believe you have value, that you matter to God? Don’t be too quick to answer. J. I. Packer, in his classic, Knowing God, writes ([READ quote](#)):

Is it true that God is love to me as a Christian?...If so, certain questions arise.

Why do I ever grumble and show discontent and resentment at the circumstances in which God has placed me? Why am I ever distrustful, fearful, or depressed?

Why do I ever allow myself to grow cool, formal, and half-hearted in the service of the God who loves me so? Why do I ever allow my loyalties to be divided, so that God has not all my heart?...Could an observer learn from the quality and degree of love that I show others – my wife? my husband? my family? my neighbors? people at church? people at work? – anything at all about the greatness of God’s love to me?

Does God really love us? And do you know that personally? It’s worth considering.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [John 3:1-21](#)

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

I read this quote from C. S. Lewis’ The Weight of Glory last week ([READ quote](#)):  
*We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.*

Now let me try to expand on that image. Imagine the child was persuaded to leave his mud pies and go down for a holiday at the sea. But in time, the holiday becomes a drudgery. “*I’m bored. How much longer do we have to stay? Can’t we go home now?*”

We too are too quickly bored with God, the holiday become a drudgery. It’s reflected in the re-imagining of the church that is so popular today and the quest for more “authentic” spiritual experiences. We’re bored with God. And how did we get that way? We’ve forgotten the most basic of things – His astonishing love for us in Christ.

There is a connection here to this text and what we saw last week. The hope of our being born again is grounded in the Son being “lifted up.” And the Son being “lifted up” is grounded in the love of God. The love of God being the basis of it all. Now likely

– though some of our translations don't reflect this – Jesus' actual words to Nicodemus stop in v.15 and John, as the narrator, picks up in v.16 to elaborate. John longs for his readers to see afresh, if not the first time, the astonishing and captivating love of God shown for us in His giving His Son. He longs for us to understand, and deeply so, what Nicodemus could not at this point. That there is the possibility held forth that we “*should not perish but have eternal life.*” Eternal life – a richness, fullness, wholeness, not just in its duration but in its depth. And not just something later but now. The possibility held forth for whoever “*believes in Him.*” Whoever would place their faith, their confidence in the finished work of Christ, entrusting themselves to Him once for all and daily so.

Such is John's message to us. God has loved us so in His Son. And we then should trust His Son to save us. All this rooted in the love of God. But what of this love?

## **I. THE FACT OF GOD'S LOVE**

### *A) The Nature of His Love*

What is its nature? Let's try and lay a foundation before we go any further.

#### 1. What it is not

Clearly, what it is not is apathy. Nor is it in any way a fleeting feeling.

#### 2. What it is

The word here is *agapao* – the noblest and strongest word for love in the ancient Greek. It is not an emotion. It is an act of the will. John uses it to describe the love of the Father for the Son, the love of the Son for the Father, for His own, and then their love for Him and for one another. And then here, wonder of wonders, God's own love for us.

### *B) The Reality of His Love*

Such is the nature of His love. That's the foundation. That said, let me clear the ground a bit as well. For there are certain barriers towards seeing the reality of this love.

#### 1. Despite the ugliness in the Church

What about the ugliness in the Church, the hypocrisy, the injustices, even then cruelty? What about the persecution of other groups, the horror of the Crusades, the support of the African slave-trade? What evidence is that of the love of God? Hear me. All those things were wrong. And we should mourn them, both the hurt and the shame.

But think with me. Suppose for a moment that Christianity is true. Suppose there really is a God who loves us with a love more radical than we could deserve or imagine. Who then would be most attracted to it? The weak, the wounded. The insecure, the unstable. The foolish, the frail. People who might still do terrible things. People like you and me. I know it sounds strange, but our checkered past and our blemished present are testimonies to the winsomeness of our hope. For it's not our performance or works that secure our status before heaven but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

#### 2. Despite the hurt in our lives

That said, there is another barrier – not just the ugliness in the Church but the pain in our lives – disappointments, betrayals, injury, illness, loss. What evidence is that of the love of God? Hear me. All those things are real. And we should mourn them as well.

But think with me. Suppose for a moment that Christianity is true. Suppose there really is a God who loves us with a love more radical than we could deserve or imagine. How then would we expect the love of such a God to express itself? To go to great lengths to rouse us, to cause us to depend upon Him alone, even if that would cause us pain.

C. S. Lewis wrote quite a bit about this. In [The Problem of Pain](#) ([READ quote, p.43](#)):

*To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by*

*stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us more lovable.*

Then, even more succinctly, Lewis wrote in [A Grief Observed](#) ([READ quote, pp.50-51](#)):

*What do people mean when they say, "I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?" Have they never been to a dentist?*

Now, obviously that's not everything to be said on the subject but it's well worth taking to heart. John speaks of God loving the world. And that love is intensely real.

## **II. THE WONDER OF GOD'S LOVE**

Okay, with the ground cleared and the foundation poured, what do see in our text? ([READ John 3:16](#)) God "*so loved*" – "it's demonstrated, it shows itself in this way."

### *A) What He Gave*

God "*so loved*" in what He gave, in the gift that was given.

#### 1. His love for the Son

Which was what? What was this gift? "His only Son" – words pointing not just to the profound uniqueness of the Son but to an eternal treasuring of the Son by the Father.

#### 2. His love for us

That Son He gave – both incarnation and crucifixion. And it is the love of the Father for the Son that is the measure of His love for us. How much does He love us? That much!

*Illustration:*

This harkens back to Genesis 22 when the love of Abraham for the LORD was tested in being called to sacrifice his son, Isaac ([READ Genesis 22:1-12](#)). What made this such a test? Not just that the promise hinged on Isaac but Abraham's love for Isaac! A foreshadowing of what would happen years later when the Son of God would not be spared, when He would show Himself to be the sacrifice for all who would turn to Him.

### *B) To Whom He Gave*

God "*so loved*" in what He gave. And to whom. Now this is vital for us to consider lest we think somehow we deserved this. "*For God so loved the world...*"

#### 1. The world is big

There's a surprise in this, a shock factor. For the Jewish reader, this meant God's love and salvation goes out beyond the Jewish race to Gentiles. It means this is not just for one nation or group but to all without distinction or exceptions. The "world" is big.

#### 2. The world is bad

But the surprise, the shock factor goes beyond that. The "world" isn't just big. If you keep reading through John, you realize it's bad as well. When John writes of the "world," he's speaking of the human race, fallen and organized in rebellion against God.

*Illustration:*

That's who God so loved. All born out even in the history as it unfolded with the bronze serpent ([READ 2 Kings 18:1-4](#)). That thing was never meant to be a god! It was meant to point to the living God and our abiding need of Him. So when John writes of God so loving the "world," we see then not merely His mercy meeting the needs of the undeserving but His grace forgiving the sin of the ill-deserving. That's the "world."

### *C) Why He Gave*

God "*so loved*," first, in what He gave; second, in to whom He gave; and then third, in why He gave ([READ John 3:17-21](#)). Why did Jesus come? It's so clear.

#### 1. Not to condemn

Not to condemn the world. Now, disbelief does lead to judgment. But that is not the purpose of God's sending His Son. For the world stood in a condemned state already.

## 2. But to save

Jesus came not to condemn but to save. Now one would think that if the Son of God came into a world of sinners, it would be for judgment. But it wasn't. It was to save. And so to reject Him is thus to be due, in a sense, a double condemnation.

### *Illustration:*

Which harkens back to Numbers 21 again (**READ Numbers 21:4-9**). Note that before the bronze serpent was crafted, the people were already dying. There's a parallel here to the coming of Jesus into a world that was already condemned and dying.

### *Application:*

(**READ John 3:16**) When you really hear what John is saying here, it's absolutely staggering. Yet it's true. We're so unlovely and seemingly so unlovable. Nothing in us to attract His love towards us, to prompt it or call it forth. Yet He does love us. We have no categories for such a love. It's absolutely staggering that God should love us so.

And then to love us so lavishly! It is His Son He has given. His Son with you and me in mind. To love someone is to do the best for them we can. And so He has.

### **CONCLUSION:**

This is the love of God. And the thing we need to see is that this is an inclusive love. What do I mean by that? I have memories of my years in grade school that have stayed with me. I can remember being moved from one school to another after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, the result being that I was always behind the popularity curve, never with the "in" crowd. Worse, I was teased and picked on, pushed to the side. The cliques, the exclusive little groups kids make to shut others out – as a parent, my antennae are up to such things. They bring an allergic reaction. My blood begins to boil. I cannot handle the exclusivity.

Now, you might well be saying at this point, "*Yeah, I'm with you. But isn't Christianity exclusive? Aren't you saying some are in and some are out, depending on what they believe?*" Well, no. I'm not saying that. Jesus is. So your issue is with Him.

But let's think about the accusation for just a moment. It's really a bit simplistic, isn't it? After all, everyone is exclusive. Everyone has their take on reality. Everyone thinks they're right and believes the world would be a better place if everybody else would simply see things the way they did. We're all exclusive. Which means you can't reject Christianity because it's exclusive since it's no more so than any other worldview.

So that's one thing to consider. And here's another. This exclusivity of Christianity is far more inclusive than you may think. After all, what is the gospel message? (**READ John 3:16**) What is it that every other faith or religion calls you to? Adhere to certain rules, give to certain causes, vote a certain way, go through certain rituals, take a particular pilgrimage – all to measure up. And where does that bring you? Uncertainty. Insecurity. Never knowing if you've done enough or vainly boasting that you have. What is it Christianity calls you to? Not to measure up but to look up – to look to Jesus and His finished work for you on the cross. Yes, it constrains your behavior. But from the inside. You find yourself saying, "*He has done so much for me. Rescuing me from my addictions to myself and my rebellion against God. And I owe it all to Him. How then can I live to please Him?*" And you go into His Word, together with His people, in dependence upon His Spirit and your life begins to change. That's the love of God shown for us in the giving of His Son. And He calls us to trust Him to save us.

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