

When I announced at the start of the year that we were doing 52 of the most essential verses in the Bible, there was one verse we all knew we would cover: John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

We’ve all heard this verse a hundred times, if you haven’t heard it a thousand times. Somehow, somehow though, I want you to hear it fresh this morning. I want you to read this with the same sense of revelatory newness that one of the first readers of John’s Gospel would have read this verse.

I want to help you this morning step into the sandals of a man who in John 3 began with a clandestine visit at night to meet Jesus, and ended up discovering the divine love of God. A love that redefines everything. His name is Nicodemus, and he is a Pharisee.

History has given the Pharisees a bad reputation. They are the hard-nosed legalists who conspired to crucify the very Messiah they claimed to be waiting for. They would rather deny the truth than sacrifice their own power and prestige.

But what is true of the group, however, is not always true of the individual. On this night, there is one Pharisee who comes seeking the truth. He comes not in a professional capacity, but in a personal one. He comes not out of curiosity, but of conscience.

His search is genuine, but still he comes under the cover of darkness. John does not reveal his hidden motivations, but it is true- he has much to protect and much he can’t risk losing. He is a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council- the supreme court of the Jewish people that met in the Hall of Hewn Stones built into the north wall of the Temple. If word got out in that council of 71 that he was seeking out Jesus, there’s no telling what the fallout might be.

And so he comes in the shadows away from prying eyes and tattling lips. He comes in the shadows because there is darkness that is cast over his own heart. While the other members of the Sanhedrin refuse to believe, Nicodemus has seen the miracles Jesus has performed. Only the power of God could explain the wonders he’s seen and heard from reliable witnesses. How could you explain such things, unless...could He possibly be...Nicodemus could only wonder. He rightly calls Jesus’ miracles “signs” for they are signposts pointing to the truth.

The Sanhedrin party line simply doesn’t fit with what Jesus actually says. Despite the arguments of the other religious leaders, Nicodemus has heard Jesus teach, and he feels the divine power of Jesus words.

There have always been things that bothered him. The crooked money changers at the temple for instance. “What’s good for business is good for the temple,” they would say, but it never sat well with him, but no one would confront the corruption, until Jesus.

For too many nights, Nicodemus lay in bed wide awake wondering. During yet another sleepless night, he decides to wonder no more. Nicodemus wants to know. He has to know. He has longed for the Messiah's kingdom, and if Jesus is the one...Well, it doesn't matter what the others say, then does it?

As he makes his way to Jesus, between every furtive glance over his shoulder, he rehearses his words. Yet when he finds Jesus the practiced words cannot hide the tremor in his voice, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."*

Nicodemus hasn't even asked a question yet, but as He so often did Jesus gets straight to the heart of the issue. Despite the darkness, Jesus sees Nicodemus' heart quite clearly. This Pharisee came seeking the kingdom, so Jesus points him to the kingdom, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

What sort of riddle is this, Nicodemus wonders. How does a full-grown man get born a second time? *"How can someone be born when they are old?"* he asks Jesus. *'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'"*

It's not a man's body that needs a new birth. It is his soul. Only one thing can dispel the darkness of the human heart and that is a birth not of womb and flesh, but of baptism and spirit. Jesus answers him,

*"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*

Jesus says this as though the truth is obvious, but Nicodemus is still confused. There are few in the entire country with his knowledge and education, but he still can't follow Jesus. *"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked."*

There is patience in the words Jesus speaks next, but also exasperation. He has spoken the truth of these things many times. The darkness that keeps Nicodemus from seeing is not a lack of understanding. It's an unwillingness to believe.

*10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?"*

Nicodemus should have known. He could have known for he has studied the prophets more than anyone. He knows the Scriptures better than anyone. The prophet Ezekiel foretold of how he would give his people a new nature.

*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses...I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

But even if Nicodemus doesn't understand the prophets, he should be able to believe what he has seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. Suddenly, Nicodemus is a young pupil in school once again unable to move on to the more advanced lesson because he still can't grasp the first lesson.

It's a frustration Jesus would have frequently with God's chosen people. They could hear what he said, but not listen to a word. They could witness the works He would perform, but still not see a thing.

But Nicodemus was different. He truly wanted to know, but he was blinded by the same thing that sometimes blinds you and me. We really want to learn. We really want to know, but our search is darkened by those around us. Our thoughts too easily swayed by the opinions of others.

Sometimes, you just have to find out for yourself. If Nicodemus truly wanted to know heavenly truth, he has come to the right place, for as Jesus tells the Pharisee, *"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven— the Son of Man."* All other men can only speculate about heavenly things, only Jesus speaks as an expert witness.

Jesus reaches deep into Israel's history to illustrate one of the greatest heavenly truths Nicodemus will ever hear. When Nicodemus' forefathers wandered in the wilderness under Moses, they grumbled and complained against Moses and against God. So, God sent serpents among the people with a fiery, venomous bite. The people quickly repented of their sin, and begged Moses to pray so that God would take the snakes away. And so God had the people make a serpent from bronze and set it upon a pole, and whenever anyone was bit by a snake they could look up to the serpent on the pole and be saved.

How weird is that? Why would God do it this way? What was the point? Jesus now gives Nicodemus the answer. The serpent on a pole was just a picture of a greater reality. In the same way, Jesus would be lifted up on a pole. He would become sin for us, so that everyone bitten by the serpent of sin could be saved.

Of course, the serpent points us all the way back to creation and the Garden of Eden and the original serpent that first tempted the first man and woman into sin. And every man and every woman since has been bitten by the same serpent. On the cross, Jesus took all that sin upon Himself. He became sin for us. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* And Jesus promises Nicodemus, and he promises you and promises me, *"that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."*

We may have heard such an invitation more times than we can count, “believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life.” For Nicodemus, however, this is stunning news. He has devoted his entire life to meeting God’s approval, trying to earn his acceptance. The Jews did not view God as a loving heavenly Father. If they viewed him as a father at all, He was a stern, demanding father who would criticize you for raising a C to a B wondering why you didn’t get an A. His standards were exacting. His expectations out of reach. His approval rare, unless you followed all the rules.

But here is Jesus saying that God has offered salvation to everyone who believes.

### **Our Core Verse**

Next, comes perhaps the most well-known words in all of the Bible. Interestingly enough, we’re not even sure who said them. Some red-letter Bibles have these as the words of Jesus. Other translations have the quotation marks of Jesus words ending at verse 15. Keep in mind, the original parchments and scrolls of Scripture didn’t have quotation marks, and punctuation and paragraphs that we’re used to. Sometimes, it’s our best guess who said what.

In other words John 3:16 may be Jesus’ words to Nicodemus spoken on that shadowy night, or they may John’s words to us as his readers. Ultimately, though, it doesn’t matter. Either way, these words were spoken by the divine Son of God or written by power of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Whether spoken by Jesus or John, these are God’s words to us. John 3:16, our Core Verse this week, is the shortest, simplest, sweetest explanation of the good news ever given.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

If I could summarize John 3:16 even more it is this: God loves us. If I could make it more personal it is this: God loves you.

Why did God send Jesus? Why did Jesus come? Why did he go to the cross? In a word, the answer is love. God sent Jesus because He loves us. Jesus came because he loves us. Jesus died on the cross because he loves you.

### **In Love with Love**

Our culture is in love with love. We love love. We believe love is the answer. Love makes the world go round. Love is all you need.

I want to play a little game called “Love it or Leave it.” I’m going to show you a picture of something that some people love, but not everyone. So when we show you what it is, I want you to yell out whether you love it, or leave it.

- K-Pop

- Cilantro
- Crocs
- White Castle sliders
- Adam Sandler movies
- Black licorice
- Family reunions
- Apple products
- Clowns
- Cats
- Boxy Cars

We love all sorts of things. We love pizza. We love strawberry, banana smoothies. We love our husband. We love our wife. We love a day at the spa. We love a Saturday morning hitting yard sales. We love our children. We love the Chiefs. We love the Cardinals. We love our best friend. We love a brownie out of the center of the pan. We love when all the lights are green. We love our cat. We love our dog. We love being on the lake on a crisp spring morning and the water is like glass. We love our hobbies. We love a long, hot bath.

With all of this love, the one thing there seems to be a shortage of is love. There is no love on the city streets filled with the broken glass of shop windows and canisters of tear gas. There is little love on social media when we vent our angry missives like hand grenades without thought where they might go off. There is little love in a hurting, broken marriage where husband and wife go to bed back to back. It may be a queen size bed, but there are miles between them. There is little love after months of pandemic fatigue, you're tired of so-called experts telling you what to do, and the last thing you want to hear is one more know-it-all opinion.

When John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world" it's not talking about love songs and warm fuzzy feelings. It's not love in the same way you love a medium rare steak with a perfect sear or binge-watching your favorite show. It's a love greater than your love for your children, your friends, or your parents. It's even deeper than the love you have for your girlfriend, your boyfriend, your husband or your wife.

### **A New Kind of Love**

The Greeks had all sorts of words for love. There was *phileo* which was the love of deep friendship. *Storge* was the deep affection and affinity shared between family members. *eros* was the intimate passion shared among lovers. They had other words too. All of these words get translated into love in English.

But when Jesus comes along announcing the good news of the kingdom, and when the apostles begin writing letters to all these brand new churches, none of these words were sufficient to describe the love of God. They basically had to invent a new word for love to describe how God loves us.

That word and the word that is used here in John 3:16 is *Agape*. It can be define a number of different ways. It is unconditional love. It is the love of action rather than a love of feeling. It is love for the unlovely. It is love for those who don't deserve it, can't reciprocate it, won't appreciate it and aren't able to offer anything in return.

All of those other words for love are based in some way and what you get out of it. *Phileo*- I love you because of our companionship and shared interests and all the things we do together. *Storge* – I love you because we're in the same family, we live together, and we grew up together, we take care of each other, and we've got all this shared history. *Eros* - I love you because...well, we all understand how the because works there.

Here's the real difference between *Agape* love and all other types of love:

Other kinds of love: I love you because. . . Because of what you do for me. Because of how you make me feel. Because of the fun we have together.

*Agape* love: I love you. Period. No conditions. No strings attached. No mutual benefit. No symbiotic relationship. Just a pure, generous, sacrificial willingness to give the other person what they need, even if you get nothing out of it at all. *Agape* will do for you because you need it, even if it gets nothing in return.

A new word was needed because this kind of love changes everything.

### **A Christian Response to God's Love**

The amazing truth of John 3:16 should affect us in a couple of different ways. First, if you are a follower of Jesus, then God's love for us becomes our primary model for how we are to love others.

God's love is an example for us to follow. As God so loved the world, so we ought to love one another. *Agape* love should redefine all our other kinds of love. *Agape* love redefines our *phileo* love, our friendship love. What happens if we love our friends unconditionally? If we're not constantly measuring who gives what and who takes what in the friendships?

*Agape* love redefines our *storge* love, our love of family, Wow! Wouldn't that change our homes if we learned to love our parents, our children, our siblings unconditionally? If we could get rid of the one-upmanship, the tracking of unmet expectations, the bargaining, the disappointments, the guilt trips, it would revolutionize our families.

And for you married couples out there, what if *Agape* redefined our *eros*. I know I need to tread carefully here. So often, though, there is no more selfish love than erotic love. In those passionate moments it can be all about what we want. What if every Christian husband and every Christian wife turned that around and treated those most intimate moments as an opportunity to give regardless of what you got out of it. I'm telling you folks, the world has no idea what good sex is until they've tried *agape* sex.

## **What God's Love Means for Those Who Are Not Yet Followers**

Secondly, for those of us who may be on the edges of faith- You're still looking, maybe dipping your toe in the water, but you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, here's what you need to take away from this: God loves you.

Think about this. God loved you before you ever believed in Him. God loved you even when you didn't give a care about what He thought. God loved you even when He was the furthest thing from your mind.

I think most of us would describe ourselves as loving people. We believe we should love people. We have no problem loving everyone in general. What we have a hard time with is loving specific people. When John 3:16 says "For God so loved the world," it doesn't mean that God just loved everyone in general. It means that He loved you specifically. God loves you, so he sent Jesus so He could save you and know you and have a relationship with you. Jesus died for your sins, specifically. God is infinite, so his heart has an infinite capacity for individual love.

That's what it means when it says, "For God so loved the world."

### **Whoever**

There's another word I need to highlight in this verse, and that is "whoever," as in "whoever believes in him." Whoever. That means anyone. Everyone. Whoever. Even you. Regardless of your past. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what anyone has done to you. There is absolutely nothing in your life that makes you so unlovely, that God doesn't love you.

Whoever means you can believe in him because He loves you, and he promises you eternal life.

We don't know how long Jesus and Nicodemus talked. We don't know at what hour Nicodemus returned home, but I believe he walked home in the light. The shadow had been removed from heart. Nicodemus was a changed man. He had received the love of God and he believed in Jesus. Nicodemus no longer had to earn God's approval with his perfect performance, for now He knew that God already loved him.

John mentions Nicodemus twice more in gospel. In John 7, we get a glimpse of him in the council of the Sanhedrin. The officials were looking to arrest Jesus and bring him in. Nicodemus may have been only 1 voice among 71 but he speaks up in Jesus' defense arguing that he should receive a fair hearing. Nicodemus' reason would not restrain the leaders for long, but we see the seed of faith growing and bearing fruit.

Finally, in John 19 we see Nicodemus among the believers helping prepare Jesus' body for burial after his crucifixion. He's no longer in the shadows. Church history tells us that Nicodemus was indeed a man of faith.

I pray this morning has reminded you of the incredible love that God has for you or helped you see it for the first time. Somebody here this morning needed this message of love. Maybe that's you. You needed to be reminded. You needed to remember. You needed to know.