

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 23, 2018**

THE CHRISTMAS GOSPEL

Luke 3:14-17

You don't have to conduct a poll to know that John 3:16 is one of the best known and best loved verses in the Bible. It may be the #1 best known and most loved verse of all time. Not that there are not others we turn to for comfort or encouragement or counsel or direction or inspiration or reassurance. Among them are:

Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Proverbs 3:5-6:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge Him
and He will direct your paths."

Psalm 23, from beginning to end, including verse 1:
"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

And verse 4:

"Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for You are with me."

Psalm 46:1:

"God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble."

And verse 10:

"Be still, and know that I am God."

There is also Philippians 4:13, though it is often misunderstood: "I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength." It does *not* mean that I can do literally anything and everything. For example, I cannot leap tall buildings at a single bound. I can't even dunk a basketball on a regulation-height rim. It *does* mean that God does and will give me the grace and strength to handle any situation in life, whether I am hungry or well-fed, rich or poor, weak or strong, healthy or sick, lonely or not, with contentment and joy in the Lord.

There is also Matthew 6:33: "Seek first His kingdom" – whose kingdom? The kingdom of God – "and His righteousness, and all these things" – everything we humans tend to worry about having, or having enough of – "will be added to you as well."

Matthew 7:12: “Treat others the way you want others to treat you.” The Golden Rule. Wouldn’t the world be a better place if more people did that? If nations did that? Wouldn’t Washington be a better place if Republicans and Democrats and Independents did that? And America as a whole?

I could give an entire message, or a whole series of messages, with nothing but best known or most loved verses in the Bible. You may well have a favorite verse, or more than one, that I have not mentioned.

But there is something about John 3:16 that grabs our attention and holds it. There is a reason John 3:16 continues to show up on signs at football stadiums around the country. It is the message of the gospel, and the message of Christmas itself, in a nutshell.

The message of John 3:16 has been described this way:

God	The greatest Giver
So loved	The greatest degree
The world	The greatest company
That He gave	The greatest act
His only Son	The greatest gift
That whoever	The greatest invitation
Believes	The greatest simplicity
In Him	The greatest attraction
Shall not perish	The greatest promise
But	The greatest difference
Have	The greatest certainty
Eternal life	The greatest possession

Is that a great message, or what? It is the essence of the gospel, which, as the apostle Paul says, is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

John 3:16 is a verse that reveals to us the heart of God – a heart of unrivaled, unstoppable, unending love – for a world full of sinners. When the Bible says that God so loved the world, it means that He loves people. Not just in general or in theory but personally. It is not like Charlie Brown’s friend Linus, who said in exasperation: “I love mankind ... It’s people I can’t stand!” That is not what it means when the Bible says that “God so loved the world.” It means that we are the objects of His love. You are the object of His love. Personally. So am I. So are all the people you love. And all the people you don’t like. And all the people with whom you disagree. We are all the objects of His love.

THE MEANING OF GOD’S LOVE

But what does it mean to say that God loves us? That God loves you? With a big assist from D. A. Carson, let me try to explain it this way. Picture a couple – let’s call them Meghan and Harry – walking hand in hand along a beautiful beach just before sunset. Imagine that this is before their royal wedding has taken place. They have kicked off their sandals, and the wet

sand squishes between their toes. Harry turns to Meghan, looks into her eyes, and says: “Meghan, I love you. I’ve never loved anyone more than I love you.”

What exactly does Harry mean?

To paraphrase Carson, in this day and age, Harry may mean nothing more than that he finds Meghan very attractive physically and that he desires to be intimate with her. But if Harry has at least a modicum of decency, let alone Christian virtue, the least he means is something like this: “Meghan, you mean everything to me. I can’t live without you. Your smile knocks me off my feet. Your sense of humor, the way you laugh, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair ... everything about you transfixes me. I love you!”

What he does not mean, Carson points out, is something like this: “Meghan, to be honest, you have such a horrible case of bad breath it would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so big you belong in the cartoons. Your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an 18-wheeler. Your knees are so disjointed you make a camel look elegant. Your personality makes Attila the Hun look like a wimp. But I love you!”

Now, when God comes to us and says: “I love you,” what does He mean? Does He mean that He can’t live without us? Does He mean that everything about us – our personality, our witty conversation, our beauty, our smile, our virtuous character – transfixes Him? Or does He mean something more like this?

“Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the big nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you ugly. Disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway. I love you not because you are attractive or lovely, but because it is my nature to love.” (Adapted from D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 61-63).

It is not a very flattering way to put it, I know. But it is true. The love of God for you is not about who or what you are or how you look or anything you have done or can do to ever deserve it. It is totally and completely undeserved. It is not about you or me. It is not about us as the recipients of God’s love. It is about God the Giver.

The message of Christmas – the message of the Christmas gospel expressed in John 3:16 – is not just that God loved the world, amazing as that is, given the condition the world is in. It is not just that we are the objects of His amazing love. It is that God’s love for us – unattractive, undeserving, unworthy, unlovely sinners that we are – propelled God to act, to give His only Son for us. As Paul says in Romans 5:8: “God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners” – in rebellion against Him – “Christ died for us.”

What we see in the coming of Jesus to us at Christmas is that God’s love for us is not passive. It is active. It is a giving love. He gave what was most precious to Him – His Son. It is a costly love. And a painful love. For in giving His Son, God gave Him up to suffer and die for us.

MUST-HAVE GIFTS

In our consumer culture, Christmas is all about the giving and receiving of gifts. It seems like every year there is a new “must-have” Christmas toy. In 1983, it was a Cabbage Patch doll. Then it was the Pound Puppy (1985), followed by Beanie Babies (1995) and Tickle Me Elmo (1996). One year it was the Game Boy (1989). Then along came the iPod (2002), the Xbox 360 (2005), Wii (2006), the Zhu Zhu Pet (2009), Kindle (2010), the Angry Birds Board Game (2011), the Doc McStuffins doll (2013) the *Frozen* Sing Along Elsa doll (2015), Hatchimals (2016), and LOL Surprise (2017). If you’re interested, you can go to Amazon.com and find a list of the top 100 “must-have” toys for 2018. But there is not much time left, so you’d better hurry!

Giving gifts can be fun. It can bring joy and satisfaction to see the expression of joy on the face of the recipient of your gift. Receiving gifts can be fun, too, especially if it is something on your wish list. The Bible says: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Most of us, though, are more likely to think it is more blessed to receive than to give. Not all of us, perhaps, but most of us. And not just children.

The more we are like God, though, the more we will know of the joy and blessedness of giving. And of the incredible wonder of the Christmas gift God has given us.

THE GIFT IS THE GIVER

Paul Tripp expresses it this way; “I love the gift element of the Christmas season. I love when my family updates their wish list so I can see what they want to receive this year. I love shopping up and down the aisles in search of that perfect gift.” [Not me. Shopping is not my spiritual gift.]

“I look forward with anticipation to their reaction when they receive it on Christmas. It brings me joy to know that my efforts will fill a need in their life or provide them with delight. Yes,” he says, “I’m slightly gift crazy!”

Maybe that describes some of you as well.

Tripp says: “There’s nothing wrong with the gift aspect of Christmas. In fact, the true meaning of Christmas is all about a gift. It’s the most amazing, incredible, unthinkable, counterintuitive, life-altering gift that could ever be given. It’s a gift unlike any gift that humanity has ever been given or received.

“Think about the gifts we exchange: a toy, a useful household item, a ticket to a concert, a (gift card) to a restaurant. We use it, it serves some purpose, it brings some pleasure, but eventually it runs out or breaks.”

[If TV commercials are to be believed, lots of people give or get new cars or trucks or SUVs for Christmas, including – or especially – very expensive ones. But even these, in a few years, will be replaced by newer, sleeker, fancier models.]

“The ultimate Christmas gift was not like any of those gifts. At the first Christmas, something radical happened: *The Gift was the Giver*.

“God knew that our need as sinners was so profound and that our pain and suffering in this fallen world was so deep and inescapable, that the only thing He could give us was Himself. The only gift that could save us was not a toy or a tool or a service or a (gift card)” – or a new car – “it had to be God Himself.

“Could you imagine gifting yourself to someone this year? It wouldn’t make any sense. But Christmas is about God gifting Himself to us.

“Jesus gave Himself because He was [and is] the only one who could solve our eternal problem. He came as the gift who would live the life that we could never live, die the death that we should have died, and rise again conquering sin and death so that we could have life – both everlasting life and abundant life, right here, right now.

“This Christmas,” Tripp continues, “you can be a little gift crazy. Get excited about opening your presents. Delight in giving others their gifts. Have fun using what you receive. But don’t forget the true meaning of Christmas gifts. And remind those you love about what gift giving symbolizes.

“Christmas is all about a gift, and the Gift is the Giver.” (Paul David Tripp, “Wednesday’s Word,” PaulTripp.com, December 12, 2018)

The Gift is the Giver, and the Gift – Jesus, the eternal Son of God who became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood – is the perfect expression of God’s love for us. For you. For me.

NOT TRASH

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, wrote in a letter to a friend that he regarded most human beings as trash. That is not how God sees us. It is not how God sees you. We may be “people of the halitosis,” morally speaking, as Carson says. There is plenty of evidence in the world, and in our own lives, to prove that it is true. We may be disgustingly ugly in our sinfulness. The truth is that our sin is uglier and more awful than any of us realize. But we are nevertheless of infinite value and significance to God – so valuable, so treasured that He gave His own Son to die for us.

No matter what someone may have said to you or about you, no matter how badly someone may have treated you, no matter if or how you may have been abused, you are *not* trash. You never were. You never will be. You are the object of God’s infinite love. You are the object of God’s redeeming love. You are the reason God sent His Son into the world. You are the reason Jesus became a baby and lived among us. And taught. And healed. And served. And suffered. And died. And rose again.

MONOGENES

God so loved the world – including you – that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. The word in John 3:16 translates “only” or “only begotten” is the Greek word *monogenes*. It means Jesus is absolutely unique. There is no one like Him. No one else can lay claim to being the *monogenes* Son of God. It does not mean that Jesus was created. That is an ancient heresy called Arianism. Contrary to what Arius and some other 3rd- and 4th-century Christians believed, there was never a time when Jesus was not. He is the eternally pre-existing Son of God who, out of love for a lost and broken world full of lost and broken people, willingly came to live among us in order to die for us. Though fully God, He became fully human in order to save us from our sins, to free us from our sin and guilt, and to give us the gift of eternal life through faith in Him.

WHOEVER

The Christmas gospel in John 3:16 contains a promise. You see it, don’t you? It is the promise of eternal life – life after death and abundant life, right here and right now, as Tripp says. Who is this promise for? “Whoever believes in Him.” Whoever believes in Jesus. Whoever embraces the Lord Jesus in trusting faith.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was one of the three most influential English-speaking evangelists of the 18th-century. The others were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. After preaching on one occasion, Wesley was invited to the home of some English nobility for a cup of tea. As they made polite conversation, Wesley’s hosts said: “We think, Mr. Wesley, that you went a trifle too far in your message today.”

“Oh,” said Wesley. “What made you think such a thing?”

“Well,” they said, “you indicated that God would refuse no one who came to Him. You even said that God would take the devil’s castaways.”

Wesley didn’t respond immediately. He pulled a note out of his coat pocket. It was from two women who had also heard his message that morning. He read it to his hosts: “We are just two old sinful women from the London underworld. We heard you preach, Mr. Wesley, that Jesus would take even the devil’s castaways. Hearing that, we want to start life over and give ourselves to God.”

“Whoever” is a beautiful word, isn’t it? It applies to the rich and powerful, to the poor and powerless. It applies to both weak and strong, young and old, healthy and sick. It applies to the moral and the immoral. It applies to liberals, to socialists, to progressives, to moderates and conservatives. It applies to anyone and everyone who comes to Jesus, the Son of God, trusting Him for salvation. It even applies to the devil’s castaways. Which means it applies to me. And to you.

It was God’s love that prompted Him to send His Son into the world. It was God’s love for you and me and a world full of sinners that gave birth to Christmas.

THE MISSION

When God the Father sent His Son into the world, He didn't simply send Him off by telling Him to have a good time or lots of fun. "A good time" was not the purpose of Jesus' coming to us. God sent His Son on a mission, not a vacation. That mission, as it says in verse 17, was "not ... to condemn the world but to save the world through Him."

Why did Jesus come? Not to judge or condemn the world (even though that is what we deserve). Not to punish us for our sins. Not to impose the death penalty on us. But to forgive our sins. He came so that whoever believes in Him should not perish in our sins but instead have eternal life with Him.

BELIEVE OR PERISH

Do you know what you need to do in order to perish in your sins? Absolutely nothing. If you simply go your own way in life, if you live for yourself, if you follow your natural sinful bent, if you refuse to open your heart to receive God's Christmas gift of a Savior – and all that He is – you will perish in your sins. You will receive God's just judgment. Don't let that be how your story ends.

But God sent His Son – and Jesus came into our world – so that you would not perish but have eternal life. Jesus came not to judge or condemn us, but to save us, and whoever will believe in Him.

If all you need to do to perish is nothing, what do you need to do to have eternal life? What do you need to do to be saved? It is not a matter of doing. It is a matter of believing. It is a matter of trusting in Jesus. It is a matter of simply accepting and receiving Him and the gift of salvation He offers by faith.

Have you opened your heart to receive God's Christmas gift to you? Let today be the day. Now is the time. Simply reach out to Him in faith. The Bible assures us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved (Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13).

This is the Christmas Gospel: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.