

Great Verses of the Bible
“God” So Loved
John 3:16-17
July 2, 2023
Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! We are the free because of the brave. And as we celebrate this week of independence, we celebrate and we thank all of you who have contributed to our freedom, in whatever way. So, God bless you! Now, public service announcement: Statistically, this is one of the deadliest weeks on the road there is. Be careful out there!

Today we continue our series of sermons on “Great Verses of the Bible.” And any series of sermons on “Great Verses of the Bible” must contain John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” And I always add to that, John 3:17. “For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

This is the essence of the gospel. It has been called “the gospel in a nutshell.” It is undeniable, when we read this passage, that God loves humanity. Get used to the idea! You may not love God, you may not acknowledge God, but God loves you. When I encounter someone that does not believe in God, I try, in a loving and grace-filled way, to say, “You may not believe in God, but God believes in you.”

Grace, God's grace, God's gift, God's unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving, has been described like this: There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. And there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. God loves you; get over it! This passage of Scripture clearly states for us that the initiative of salvation started with God. It's God's idea. It shows us also the motivation of God's initiative, and that is love. It shows us the scope of God's love, and that is the world. And it shows us the desire of God, and that is that the world be saved, not some of us, but all of us. Sometimes we present the gospel as if God had to be pacified and convinced to forgive, and nothing could be further from the truth. But sometimes we present the gospel in that manner. Years ago, back in yesteryear, one of the most famous sermons ever preached, in fact maybe the most famous sermon ever preached, it swept this nation and did a whole lot of good, but I hate the title of it. It was from Dwight L. Moody, but the title of the sermon is: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Sometimes we present the gospel as if God were angry, stern, unforgiving, and judgmental, and Jesus is kind and loving, and Jesus had to change God's mind from condemnation to salvation. This clearly states that it was God's initiative: “God so loved the world that He sent the Son.” The very nature of God is love. If you want a very beautiful, moving study, study the works of Saint John, the apostle John: the Gospel of John, First, Second, and Third John. You will hear over and over and over again that, at His very core, God is love. Sometimes God is presented as if God desires to beat humanity into submission, that God is just waiting to punish us, to zap us for something that we have done wrong. If I read the scriptures correctly, nothing could be further from the truth. God's desire is to love us into

acceptance, not beat us into submission. God is acting for us, on our behalf, in sending the Son. But He's doing so to satisfy His love, because it is out of love that God is acting. Love is His core. I read a quote years ago that I really loved. It says: "God is not above us, looking down in disdain, but beside us, looking up in hope." I like that. God is love at His core. God is not happy until all of His wayward, wandering children come home.

For whatever reason, for the last several months, I have been thinking about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A lot of you are familiar with that, but if you're not familiar with that, a man had two sons. The elder was faithful but kind of negative. The younger was wayward and resentful of the life he was having to live. And so, one day he says to his father, "Father, give me what is mine." The essence of what the son says is: "Old man, I wish you were dead. Give me my inheritance." And the father reluctantly does. The younger son goes off into the world and squanders his wealth. And when he begins to starve to death, he decides to come home. Now, what type of welcome do you think the younger son would receive? Scripture tells us that the loving father saw him coming a long way off, and he ran out to meet him. And he did not condemn him, and he didn't make him grovel, and he didn't chastise him, but rather, he grabbed him around the neck, he gave him a big sloppy kiss, and he said, "Son, welcome home!" God is not happy until all of his wandering kids come home: those that are good, those that are bad and those that are ugly.

God tells us that God loves not some of us, but all of us. God loves the world: those who love Him with all of their heart, with all of their mind, with all of their soul, and with all of their strength, and those who never give Him a second thought. God loves all of them equally. Saint Augustine, one of the great theologians of early Christianity, said, "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us." I used the phrase just a moment ago taken from a very bad western movie: God loves the good, the bad, and the ugly. Y'all know what I mean. You know what I mean. There are good people that are just plain good at heart. They're good at their core. God loves them. And there are bad people. They're naughty, they're naughty. And there are the ugly. It has nothing to do with what they look like. They're ugly down in their core, the very essence of who they are. And God loves them just as much.

In Philip Yancey's book, "What's So Amazing about Grace," he says, "Grace has a scent of scandal about it." As I understand what he was saying, this is what he meant: The ugly are loved just as much as the good. God offers them love and forgiveness as freely and readily as anyone else. Now, if you have been around for a while, if you've been here at Central for a while, you will have heard me say, "I wish I could believe in purgatory," purgatory being defined as a little bit of hell, for a little while, for a few folks. Now, I do not believe in purgatory. I do not believe in purgatory. I do not believe in purgatory. Pastor Pat, did I say I don't believe in purgatory? Okay. Now, the reason I'm saying this is: last time I said that, somebody after the service said, "Pastor, why do you believe in purgatory?" I don't believe in purgatory, but I would like to. It suits my sense of justice, because the ugly should have their toes singed on the way to heaven. But as I read scripture, that's not how God operates. God so loves the world. God so loved the world that he did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the

world through Him might be saved. The whole world. Not just some of us, not just a race, not just a nation, not just the good, but all of us, no matter who that is. God's desire is not to condemn, but to save.

Now, I want to say something. In a moment I'm going to say something controversial, but this is not it. This is not it. I want to admit something that some of you have admitted, some of you have thought but have not admitted, and a few of you have not thought. There are days, there are moments, that I look out at our world, and I say, "Lord, humanity is a failed experiment. Humanity is a failed experiment." But as I read this scripture, God has never thought that. For God so loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, made the ultimate sacrifice, and that is how God feels about all of humanity, not part of humanity. So, if you are under the hearing of my voice, that is how God feels about you, no matter who you are. God's desire is to save. Now, here's the controversial statement that I'm going to make. And I'm gonna invite you to take this home and chew on it, ruminate on it, think about it. It's God's desire that the whole world be saved. I believe that through Jesus Christ, God saved the world. And, at the same time, I do not believe in universal salvation. Now, how can the two of those be true? How can I believe that, through Jesus Christ, God saved the world, and not believe in universal salvation? Here's how. And I want to give you this through an illustration.

Last week, my wife and I spent a week in Taos, New Mexico. My best friend and my godson, his son, my godson, were hiking on Philmont Scout Ranch. When they finished, we met up in Taos, New Mexico. Now, before they got off the trail, we went to the local visitor center. Both of us are very interested in Native American history and Native American art. And they had a number of booths set up in there that were occupied by people from what we call the Taos Pueblo. They call themselves the Red Willow tribe. And they were showing their wares. And we were looking at that and talking to the ladies that had created these things. And my wife saw this necklace and kind of went, "Oooh!" Y'all know that? Yeah. And she oohed and aahed over it and said, "No, no, no, no," and went on. And so, we left and the rest of the day she talked about that necklace. And I said, "Okay, sweet baby darlin', I'm buying you that necklace." She shook her head, but I said, "I'm buying you that necklace." So, the next day we went back. She said, "At least let's find out if it will fit." We went back. They had all gone except the lady that was running the visitor center. She knew all the ladies. So, she went over and uncovered their stuff, got this necklace out and Jeannine put it on. And, lo and behold, it was way too small. She said, "Well, I can't wear it." The lady who's running the visitor center said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I know this lady. She's a personal friend." She called her up and said, "You remember the lady that really liked this necklace? Well, it's way too small." She said, "Well, find out how big it needs to be." And there's another necklace there that was orange. It was hideous. And Jeannine put it on, and it worked, and it was a perfect fit. This dear 80-year-old lady spent that night, over three hours, making my wife a necklace. She got up the next morning and finished it. We went the next day, put it on, and it fit perfectly. Now, in the mind of this Native American lady, that necklace belonged to Jeannine. I bought it for her. In my mind, that necklace belonged to Jeannine. But if she doesn't accept it, it ain't hers. Right? The same is true about salvation, and that is the great paradox of this passage. God so loved the world. God's desire is not to condemn anyone, but that everybody be saved. But they have to

accept that great love. They don't have to. They don't have to, but it is offered. Which leads me probably to the last controversial statement I want to say today. And that is that I do not believe that God condemns anyone. I believe that by our actions and by what we accept or reject, we either commend or condemn ourselves.

So, I want you to go home today, or if you're online listening, whenever you're listening to this, I want you to know that you know that you know that God loves you, and desires to have a relationship with you, and offers His love to you, no matter who you think you are. It's yours. You have been saved. Accept your salvation.

Let's pray. In the quietness of this moment, know that God offers you His love, His acceptance, and a relationship. And God's desire, no matter who you are, is to have that with you. But the ball is in your court. What decision will you make? What decision have you made? Let us pray.

Gracious God, thank You for this great passage of scripture that tells us that You love us, and You will not be happy until all of Your wayward children come home. And so today, Lord, we celebrate our homecoming. In Christ's name, amen.