

For God So Loved the World
John 3:14-21
March 15, 2015

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

Today's Gospel reading contains what are probably the most popular words in the Bible – John 3:16 – the Gospel in a nutshell. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Those are absolutely beautiful words. But they've been repeated so many times that people sometimes grow immune to what they really say.

To be sure you get the full impact of this verse, I want you to help me do an interactive reading of John 3:16. I'm going to read it again and this time I'll stop three times and point to you. The first time I want you to say "me" and the second and third times I want you to say "I". Ready? For God so loved **me** that he gave his only begotten Son and if **I** believe in him I will not perish but have eternal life. This verse was always intended to be personal.

Now that you see John 3:16 as personal, let me show you something else. If you combine today's Gospel and Ephesians 2:8–9, if you weave them in and out of each other, the news gets even better. Listen to this.

For God so loved me that he gave his only begotten Son and if I believe in him I will not perish but have eternal life. For it is by grace I have been saved, through faith and this not from myself, it is the gift of God not by works, so that I cannot boast. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn me, but to save me through him. And if I believe in him I am not condemned.

Have you ever heard better news?

Jesus once told a story about a pearl merchant who found a pearl of great price. After he found it, he sold everything he had just to buy it. When you combine today's Gospel with Paul's letter to the Ephesians, you get the pearl of great price.

What could be worth more than knowing that God's love for mankind is so great that he sacrificed his own Son to rescue us from Sin and he offers us salvation completely free, without regard for whom we are, how rich we are, or anything we might have done?

Furthermore, we have this truth in its purest form. We have this pearl of great price. Each of us has, as our personal possession, the greatest truth of all time. It doesn't get any better than this.

So, fellow rich people, what are we doing with our treasure? After all, this is a gift of great value. Maybe we should take steps to insure its safekeeping. Maybe we should lock it up in a beautiful church with oak doors and stained glass windows so it doesn't get away.

Maybe we should keep it shrouded in big words and spiritual talk so the rest of the world never understands what a priceless treasure it really is. Or maybe we should take out our handkerchiefs, carefully wrap it up, put it in our hip pockets and plop our Lutheran behinds down on it.

Do any of these suggestions offend you? I hope they all offend you. They're meant to offend you. I hope you're so offended that you want to run right out and do something with your pearl of great price. After all, God wants you to do something with it. Let's look at why God wants you to do something with your pearl of great price and how you can do it.

We can't just keep this pearl of great price, this tremendous knowledge of God's love and his plan of salvation, to ourselves. Remember how we personalized John 3:16? We said that God so loved me that he sent his only begotten Son and if I believe in him I will not perish but have eternal life. That statement is as true and real as God is true and real. But that statement applies to more than just you and me.

When Jesus died on the cross, John 3:16 became valid for every human being past, present, and future. That promise stands good for you, your parents, your children, your neighbor, your boss, your best friend, even for that person who hates you, the person who talks behind your back, the person who cheated you, the person who betrayed you. Jesus covered all of the sins of all people so that every person who believes in him will have eternal life.

So why doesn't everyone just believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world? They don't believe because they don't know the truth. They've been deceived. They've been lied to. Sometimes they've been given John 3:16 without John 3:17.

John 3:17 leaves no doubt that the promise is for everyone. It says: *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* People don't believe in Jesus as their Savior because they don't know that Jesus is their Savior.

The devil is the father of lies. He tells the people under his control that Jesus came to take from them instead of give to them. He tells them that Jesus came to condemn their

lifestyle when, in truth, Jesus came to save them from their lifestyle. He tells them that Jesus is an angry judge instead of a loving God.

The devil has lied so many times and for so long that John 3:18-20 becomes a sad commentary on many people's lives. It says: *Whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.*"

Some of the most comforting words in the Bible are directly followed by some of the most fearful words in the Bible. Jesus set up a pass / fail system with no middle ground. It's belief or unbelief, salvation or condemnation, heaven or hell.

Can you see why God wants you to put your pearl of great price into action? You know the truth of today's Gospel reading. You know that God loves you enough to die for you and offer you salvation as a matter of free grace. You know that truth, and that truth is setting you free and delivering you to everlasting life in the presence of God.

However, the same truth that saves you condemns the unbeliever. And I said condemns. It's not shaking a finger of disapproval, it's not a slap on the wrist, it's eternity in hell. It's so serious that the last thing Jesus said to his disciples was to go and make disciples of all nations. Drop everything else you're doing and spread the Word.

So, fellow rich people, what are you going to do with this knowledge of our saving God? What are you going to do with your pearl of great price? That's a question that everyone must answer for himself or herself. I can't answer for you, but I can answer for me.

I don't want to lock up my pearl in a beautiful sanctuary to protect it from the unbelievers. I don't want to dress up my pearl in fine words and colorful God-talk so even though the world hears it they don't understand it. I don't want to hid my pearl and keep it safely tucked away as my own little stash.

I want to take my pearl of great price out into the world and show it off. I want to show it to the hungry in the form of food. I want to show it to the homeless in the form of shelter. I want to show it to the brokenhearted in the form of caring and understanding. I want to show it to the unbeliever on his way to hell with the simple words that Jesus loves you so much he died for you and paid for all your sins.

Friends, I know that God so loved me that he gave his only begotten Son and if I believe in him I will not perish but have eternal life. I know that it is by grace I have been saved, through faith and this not from myself, it is the gift of God not by works, so that I can't boast. I know that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn me, but to save

me through him. And I know that if I believe in him I'm not condemned.

This is the treasure that is my salvation. And it's the treasure of your salvation. And when we share our treasure, our pearl of great price, with the rest of the world, it can be the treasure of their salvation, too.