

Pop Verses: John 3:16

John 3:16

Today we are looking at our Third Pop Verse we will be focusing on what is probably the most well-known Bible verse of all time. John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Martin Luther called this verse, “The gospel in miniature.” In just 27 words it sums up the gospel. It has become the mantra of our faith.

But this verse has a problem. It suffers from overexposure. It has been read and quoted so often that many of us no longer feel the power of it. For some of us, its luster has faded. Perhaps for some of you this verse is connected to bad evangelism. Some obnoxious fire breathing preachers or arrogant friend quoted it trying to cajole you into becoming a Christian. This verse suffers from exposure. As a result, its impact and meaning are diminished. So, my goal in preparing this sermon this week was to feel the power of it again – to push aside all the baggage attached to it and experience the verse anew.

Whether you are a Christian seeking renewal or a skeptic seeing something more in life the truth of today’s verse can free you from whatever is holding you back in life. It can give you the peace you are craving.

But what is that truth that will set us free? Jesus said we will know the truth and once we know the truth it will set us free. What is it?

In John 3:16 I think we can find a truth that can set us free from whatever holds us down. You see, the context of this verse is all about someone seeking to be free. His name was Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, a religious man who followed the law rigorously. His whole life he sought to earn God’s love and grace through following a bunch of religious rules. 619 to be exact.

Maybe you can relate to Nicodemus. Perhaps you’ve always seen faith and religion as a bunch of rules and “thou shalt not’s.” Maybe you grew up in a religious home or school that beat that idea into you, and it is hard to break free from it.

Nicodemus was tired of religion as rule following and wanted to be set free. He heard Jesus teach and preach and he sensed something different about Jesus. He was unlike any other rabbi he had ever known or heard. He had this overwhelming love about him. Jesus talked about love and faith in a way that moved him.

Nicodemus had to experience the truth Jesus was preaching about. He wanted to be set free from all the rules, laws, shame and judgment. But it was tricky because Nicodemus was part of a group that hated Jesus. Jesus swallowed up all their religious rules with the greatest commandment and they were not too pleased with that. So, Nicodemus met Jesus at night so no one would see him.

In the third chapter of John Nicodemus asked Jesus some questions about how to be set free. Jesus told him he needed to be born from above. This confused Nicodemus, so Jesus told him that he was going to be lifted up for all the world to see and then he would understand. Jesus was referring to his crucifixion. Jesus believed that once Nicodemus saw him on that cross and opened his heart, he would experience the truth that would set him free. It is then that the gospel of John reveals the truth that would sets us free: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” –John 3:16

Let’s break down this powerful verse.

Hear this word! God loves you. So many people see God as a power-hungry deity who demands obedience and submission. Some think God is not satisfied until we are groveling and feel terrible about ourselves and beg and crawl our way to God. That is not the God revealed in Jesus Christ. And that is not the God revealed in John 3:16. God loves you. You are God's child. God created you. God wants you to be happy and whole. How much does God love you exactly? Take a look: "For God SO loved"

To me this is one of the most overlooked words of this verse. God SO loved. God yearns for us. God loves us SO much! I like what one pastor said, God loves us so much that if "God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it." But for God it wasn't just lip service. God showed that deep love for us. "God GAVE"

God held nothing back in demonstrating God's love for us. God wooed us back by giving us God's son. Now this is when this verse gets tricky for some of us. "Okay, first I hear that Jesus is God. Now this verse tells me that Jesus is God's son and God sent Jesus to die for us. Which is it?" If you have ever felt that way you are not alone.

It's all about the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We don't believe in three gods. The Trinity is a way of expressing the three predominant ways God expresses Godself in the world. God is defined by what God does. God is the Father who creates, the Holy Spirit who guides and sustains and the Son who is with us and loves us intimately. So, one way to understand this verse is that on the cross we see God giving the most vulnerable part of Godself to us. As Philippians says, God "emptied Godself" to us in Christ. It was the ultimate display of love.

The verse then says, "everyone who believes in him." God so loved the "world." It doesn't say "God so loved the perfect people" or "God so loved the religious people." God loves everyone.

God's love reaches out to everyone. This flies in the face of many who believe they have a monopoly on God. So many Christians want to put a limit on God's love. They claim that God's love only goes so far for people. No, God's love is limitless. God's grace is within everyone, and that grace calls everyone to be in relationship with God.

The word, "BELIEVES" is probably the most misunderstood part of this verse. Believe does not mean intellectual assent. It doesn't mean you have done a bunch of mental gymnastics and rationally believe there is a God. There is a mystery to God that we could never wrap our finite minds around. We should interpret "believe" in this verse as "invest." Whenever you invest your heart, life and actions in God you will experience life as you were destined to live it.

When you invest your life into God you will not perish, which means you will not live a meaningless and purposeless existence. You will live an "eternal life," which literally translates "life of God." It is a life filled with joy, hope, peace, strength, meaning, purpose and adventure. It is eternal in its duration but it begins now!

So, I believe John 3:16 can be summed up in five words. God is crazy about you.

Believe it or not, convincing people of this is one of my toughest jobs as a pastor. Sometimes it feels as if I cannot preach on the love of God enough! There are so many voices out in the world tearing people down. There are so many people with toxic faith presenting God as an angry judge. So, I will preach in season and out of season about the love of God!

That is my goal as a preacher – that people would experience the transforming love of God wherever they are in their journey. I don't want people to hear my voice speaking, but the voice of God speaking God's love into them. That is what motivates me as a preacher. That is all I ever want to do.

We need to get back to experiencing God and God's love. We need to get back to feeling how crazy God is about us. It strikes me that in the church we spend a lot of time talking about what we think about God, about what we understand about God. We meet in Bible studies and discuss what we think and understand about the

Bible and our faith. And this is great. We must have a thinking faith. Without it we are doomed to have a destructive theology. But what I don't hear often enough in the church is people talking about their experience of God.

We need to get back in touch with our personal experiences of God. Find a person or group to talk to about your experience of the love, grace and power of God. The more you do this, the more you will be aware of how much God loves you. This awareness and experience will empower you and set you free.

I know some of you need to experience God's love in the worst way. You have been beat up, put down, knocked out, and pushed aside by people in life. Perhaps you are thinking, "Does anyone love me? Does anyone care? Does anyone understand? Does anyone know how I feel?" And Christ reaches out to you with nail scarred hands and says, "Oh, I do. I love you. I understand you. I care about you. I am crazy about you. I am here to love and empower you." "For God SO loved the world..."

God is crazy about you. Open your heart to God's love. It will set you free.