

Christ Church Valdosta, GA
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“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” That just may be the one verse in the Bible that is known the most *by the most*. Sports fans who sit on the fifty-yard line consider it adequate to simply hold up their signs with its one word and two numbers ... John 3:16. The implication is that those who notice it will instantly know what it’s all about. And the claim is simple: God loves the world so much that he sent his only Son to live as one of us and if we believe in Him, we will have eternal life.

The message is modest and direct ... if one accepts Christ as Lord and Savior, that person will inherit the life eternal ... if that someone determines that he or she does not want anything to do with Christ, that person faces a different outcome. At least that’s the logical conclusion.

There is the limitless grace of God expressed in John 3:16. However there is also the distinct possibility for some type of judgment should one choose a different path. Now listen to the very next verse, John 3:17: *“For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”* God’s intention, I believe, is never to condemn, but God will honor our choice. We have been created with freedom and that means, of course, that we can make an individual decision as to whether or not to accept the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior.

But even if we choose not to accept ... there is an inherent paradox, *is there not?* ... and that is God’s tenacious love. This may be the ultimate test of God’s grace, love, and mercy, I guess. Central to my understanding of Christianity is the assurance that God never gives up on any of us. Any of us. What does that mean exactly? I don’t know for sure. We may give up on God ... like the Prodigal Son, we may throw in the dice and wander away ... We may all but give up on ourselves, but God does not. And there is much comfort there. Marked in Baptism with the cross of Christ, we remain a child of God no matter how big a mess we make of our lives. For at the end of the day, this is not a relationship we created, nor can we sustain it by our own accomplishments. God created this relationship, God maintains it, and our passionately loving God will bring it to a desired conclusion.

One of my favorite theologians is a scholar named Marcus Borg. Borg was born and raised a Lutheran and later became an Episcopalian. That is a great source of satisfaction for me, knowing that a scholar like Borg chose to be an Episcopalian.

Commenting on John 3:16, Borg expressed his concern that this verse has the potential to twist Christianity into a religion of rewards and requirements. The reward that is dangled before the Christian, like a carrot before a donkey, is this promise of eternal life ... heaven ... however we choose to define it. The requirement is an acceptance of some set of beliefs, supplemented by prescribed behaviors that form the essence of the Christian life. In other words, believe these things ... live in this way ... and you will be saved. Obviously, the corollary applies ... fail to believe the right things and refuse to live a holy, obedient life and, well, sorry... fasten your seat belts, passengers, we’re bound for a rather hotter climate! Our evangelic brothers and sisters are fully engaged in this way of thinking. Borg warns us that even “so-called” enlightened

approaches may also reinforce this concept when it is implied that those who believe (*in the right and truly informed ways*) will be saved.

The problem with a strict interpretation of John 3:16, is that Christianity can become a kind of contract or reward structure. If we do certain things ... God will compensate us in an appropriate way. On some levels this might seem reasonable and satisfactory, but, in reality, it contradicts the heart of the Scripture and the wisdom of the Reformation that tells us again and again that salvation is not something we either earn or deserve, but rather, is a gift from God, unearned and unmerited. Completely free. And that, my good friends, is Grace!

We wander astray when our ultimate concern becomes our personal preservation, that is ... I must first take care of me and me alone. If I am not careful my total motivation in life could become not the welfare of my brothers and sisters, but my personal assurance that I will belong to the Lord forever.

This leads us to another problem with a standard reading of John 3: 16, which is the need for some to divide people into the good and the bad, the “real” Christians and the non-Christians, the saved and the damned. And of course, all this brings to mind that weird place in between ... what about those times in our lives when we doubt or struggle to believe? Will we also inherit the eternal life?

And so, you see the evolving struggle. The goal of life should be our transformation into the image of Jesus Christ ... living in a loving, caring manner. We should be concerned about the welfare of all people, ... the hungry, the poor, the sick, those living at the margins of life. How sad if we substitute an obsession with getting into heaven for the compassion and concern for others that ought to motivate us. If we are not careful, we can easily miss the moment and become uncaring religious people in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, who passed by the needy man, as they hurried on to secure their own salvation.

So. As we reflect today on this most beautiful of all verses ... John 3:16 ... may we remember that the way of Christ is something more than personal salvation ... it is the way we live in peace and love with our neighbors everywhere. It is the desire to walk in the ways of Christ, forever changed in His likeness. And ultimately, it is the realization of the limitless, unimaginable love that God has for each of us.

Allow me to close with these summary thoughts. God loves the world. God loves me and God loves you. God offers us, in relationship with Jesus Christ, a different way, a different possibility for living. Sometimes, that is hard to know and to experience. Life is tough. But we can look up to the cross, we can always look up to Christ, Christ lifted up, and see God's love, never God's punishment, and there we see and experience healing and hope. We see the possibility and promise of new life in Christ. Forever. Amen.