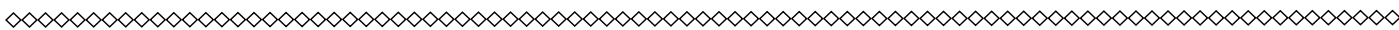




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**Sermon Brief**  
**Text: John 3:16-21**  
**Title: God's Love**  
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-  
fully proclaim  
the whole coun-  
cil of God in  
scripture!



**INTRODUCTION**

Today in many parts of the world Valentine's Day is being celebrated. The tradition is very old and has Christian origins.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Valentine's Day (commonly shortened to Valentine's Day) is an annual holiday held on February 14 celebrating love and affection between intimate companions. The holiday is named after one or more early Christian martyrs named Valentine and was established by Pope Gelasius I in AD 496. It is traditionally a day on which lovers express their love for each other by presenting flowers, offering confectionery, and sending greeting cards (known as "valentines"). The holiday first became associated with romantic love in the circle of Geoffrey Chaucer in the High Middle Ages, when the tradition of courtly love flourished.

Modern Valentine's Day symbols include the heart-shaped outline, doves, and the figure of the winged Cupid. Since the 19th century, handwritten valentines have largely given way to mass-produced greeting cards.

As is often the case, the idea of the celebration in the beginning has changed over time so that the modern celebration bears little resemblance to its early orientation. Originally conceived as a commemoration of the martyrdom of a Christian leader with the name Valentine the celebration today has no religious orientation and is a celebration purely of romantic love between men and women.

The emphasis of today's celebration on love provides the occasion to re-examine the idea of love, particular as found in the New Testament, and especially as love is associated with God. Modern western ideas of love<sup>2</sup> in general have little to do the teaching of the New Testament on love. If we're not careful we will take the ideas of love from our world and read them back into the Bible, falsely assuming then that this is what scripture is talking about.

What is love? Particularly, what is God's love? One of the main scripture texts opening a window of insight here is John 3:16-21. Turn with me in your Bibles to this text as I read it.

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.

17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See "Valentine's Day," Wikipedia online.

<sup>2</sup>See "love," Merriam-Webster online dictionary:

Etymology: Middle English, from Old English *lufu*; akin to Old High German *luba* love, Old English *lēof* dear, Latin *lubēre*, *libēre* to please

Date: before 12th century

1 a (1) : strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties <maternal love for a child> (2) : attraction based on sexual desire : affection and tenderness felt by lovers (3) : affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests <love for his old schoolmates> b : an assurance of love <give her my love>

2 : warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion <love of the sea>

3 a : the object of attachment, devotion, or admiration <baseball was his first love> b (1) : a beloved person : darling —often used as a term of endearment (2) British —used as an informal term of address

4 a : unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another: as (1) : the fatherly concern of God for humankind (2) : brotherly concern for others b : a person's adoration of God

5 : a god or personification of love

6 : an amorous episode : love affair

7 : the sexual embrace : copulation

8 : a score of zero (as in tennis)

9 capitalized Christian Science : god

<sup>3</sup>3.16 Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενή ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων

I intentionally include verses 17-21 in our text today. John 3:16 is so often lifted out of its context, and thus much of its meaning is lost in the process. Verses 16-21 stand together as a natural unit of idea expression. Also they stand as the gospel writer's elaboration on the mission of Jesus into this world. In 3:1-15, the text narrates the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Jewish Pharisee who came to Jesus seeking answers to personal questions about discovering God. When Jesus told him that to know God Nicodemus had to 'be born again' this religious man was completely puzzled. He asked Jesus (v. 9), "How can these things be?" Jesus' response in vv. 10-15 underscores the necessity of Jesus, as the Son of Man, having 'descended' to earth to provide salvation before 'ascending' back into Heaven. The climax of Jesus' words are in vv. 14-15: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus, by his crucifixion and resurrection, will provide God's deliverance to all who turn in faith commitment to Him. Out of that commitment will come eternal life.

Then in verses 16-21 the gospel writer, likely the apostle John, provides his elaboration of that mission of Jesus. The text naturally divides into two emphases that I want to stress with you today.

## BODY

### I. God's love expressed in Christ's death, v. 16

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.

3.16 Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

For us moderns love is mostly a feeling, usually a warm positive attitude toward another person. In the Bible, love has virtually no connection to feeling whatsoever. In contrast, love is commitment to another in order to take positive action in their behalf. Love is not an emotion. Rather it is a determination to do go for the other person. This is the reason for the use of two distinct Greek words for love in the New Testament out of the many available words in ancient Greek: ἀγάπη (*agape*) and φιλία (*philia*). Particularly important is ἀγάπη since it is the primary reference inside the New Testament to God's love. And is the word use here in John 3:16.<sup>4</sup> Not commonly used in ancient Greek, the word stresses self-sacrifice as commitment to benefit others. The word ἀγάπη then provided the needed word for John to describe God's commitment to the world.

This verse becomes the Gospel in a summary and captures the very essence of God's love. Let me stress a couple of aspects here.

**First, God's love is commitment to the world.** In the fourth gospel, 'world' (κόσμος) means the world of sinful people. God created us and sustains the creation He made. But we have rebelled and turned away from our Creator in immoral and sinful living. In human love, when rejection occurs it becomes the death of love. But not so with God's love. It has survived human rejection and remains strong despite our rebellion. Paul put it this way to the Christians at Rome (Rom. 5:7-8, NRSV):<sup>5</sup> "7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." God continues to love us even though we have become unlovely and barely lovable. How do we know this?

The cross of Jesus Christ is the supreme expression of God's love. This is the second point I want to stress here: **God's love is concrete action.** Love is not words nor sentiment. Rather, it is concrete action intended to benefit its object. The cross of Jesus Christ reflects just that. When God allowed His Son to die a horrible death on the cross, did He not love Jesus? Modern reasoning has trouble seeing God's love in the death of a person. But the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the Father loves the Son.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubting the Father's love for Christ. The four gospels in their depiction of the blessings upon the ministry of Jesus by God make this point unquestionably clear.

The dilemma faced by God was simple. He loves sinful humanity, and sinful humanity is totally incapa-

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εις αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. 3.17 οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ. 3.18 ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ. 3.19 αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν ποιηρὰ τὰ ἔργα. 3.20 πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ· 3.21 ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστιν εἰργασμένα.

<sup>4</sup>The noun is ἀγάπη and the verb is ἀγαπάω.

<sup>5</sup>See also 1 John 3:16 (NRSV): "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

<sup>6</sup>"John emphasizes repeatedly that God the Father loves the Son (John 5:20 ; John 17:23 John 17:26) and that the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). Because the Father loves the Son, he made his will known to him. Jesus in turn demonstrated his love to the Father through his submission and obedience." [Glenn E. Schaefer, "Love," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology online]

ble of saving himself. Thus God had to take action or else humanity would perish. But He could not, and can not, compromise His holy character. Thus He could not just dismiss humanity's sinfulness. He would cease to be a holy, righteous God, had such action been taken. Jesus then had to become the Sacrificial Lamb of God that gave up His life on the cross in order to redeem sinful humanity from destruction in Hell. Note Paul's depiction of this in Rom. 3:21-26 (NRSV):

21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Praise God! Jesus died for us on the cross. Through that we know that God continues to love us in spite of ourselves.

What implication does this have for us now as the children of God? Clearly, with our being changed by God in faith commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior, we now are to love others, not in the power of our own love. Instead, we love through the love of God flowing into our lives and then through our lives to others.<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:8 captures the essence of this obligation: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

On this Valentine's Day, let us celebrate love, but true love that comes from God and transforms our lives so that we can love others in the love of God.

## II. God's love in Christ as deliverance from condemnation, vv. 17-21.

17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

3.17 οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνῃ τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ' ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ. 3.18 ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ. 3.19 αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν ποιηρὰ τὰ ἔργα. 3.20 πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ· 3.21 ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστιν εἰργασμένα.

Verses 17-21 amplify the last part of verse sixteen: "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The aim of Christ's death is salvation for all who will come to faith commitment to God through Christ. Jesus' mission on earth was not in its first expression to condemn the world but to save the world. But judgment day is coming and eternal damnation looms around the corner for all who refuse to come to faith in Christ.<sup>8</sup> Hell is real; eternal punishment of sinners is certain. This is true, despite modern distaste for this reality. There is no getting around this. Hell is just as sure for the sinner, as Heaven is for the believer!

John makes this point dramatically clear here. But he also makes another important point. The death of Jesus on the cross pushes people to have to choose. One cannot remain neutral or indifferent to Jesus. He comes to sinful human forcing them to either accept Him or to reject Him. This confrontation reality is intentional by God. His love for sinful human necessitates forcing them to intentionally make a decision about

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<sup>7</sup>"We are totally incapable of loving either God or others a condition that must be corrected by God before we can love. The Bible's ways of describing this process of correction are numerous: "circumcision of the heart" ( Deut 30:6 ); God's "writing his laws" on our hearts ( Jer 31:33 ); God's substituting a "heart of flesh" for a "heart of stone" ( Eze 11:19 ); being "born again" by the Spirit ( John 3:3 ; 1 John 5:1-2 ); removing old clothing and replacing it with new ( Col 3:12-14 ); dying to a sinful life and resurrecting to a new one ( Col 3:1-4 ); moving out of darkness into light ( 1 John 2:9 ). Until that happens, we cannot love.

"God alone is the source of love ( 1 John 4:7-8 ); he "poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" ( Rom 5:5 ). God's love then awakens a response in those who accept it. God loves through believers, who act as channels for his love; they are branches who must abide in the vine if they are to have that love ( John 15:1-11 ). We have the assurance that we have passed from death to life because we love others ( 1 John 3:14 ).

"Once we have received God's love as his children, he expects us to love. In fact, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" ( 1 John 4:8 ). Jude urges his readers to keep themselves in God's love (v.21)."

[Glenn E. Schaefer, "Love," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology online]

<sup>8</sup>For more details see Leon Morris, "Judgment, Day of," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology online.

Christ. John sets the alternatives very clear: "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Why?

The confrontation nature of Christ's coming exposes the true condition of humanity! Those who believe in Jesus reflect openness to God and find life, abundant and eternal. Those who reject Christ reflect their profound sinful nature and set themselves up for the day of judgment where their sinful nature will be fully exposed before the throne of God. The correctness of God's sentencing them to eternal damnation become obvious.

Jesus comes into the world to die for you, my friend. But His coming also forces you to make a decision. Will you accept Him? Or, reject Him? The choice is yours. But your choice is not without consequences! Your eternal destiny hangs in the balance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Today is Valentine's Day. A day when we celebrate human love, and especially romantic love. This has legitimacy. But for believer's it is the opportunity to celebrate true love and to reaffirm a commitment to God and God's love. Let us love as we are admonished in scripture:

1 John 3:18: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

1 John 4:7: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."