

John 3:16-36

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 October 2023

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] We're picking things up again at John 3, 16, continuing in our series. The Gospel of John, Sunday mornings. Turn that up. We pray one more time as we turn to God's Word.

Father, in these moments, would you speak? And would you have us listen? And would you do that work that we desperately need you to do by your Spirit in our hearts.

Make us more like Christ. In his name we pray. Amen. In 2009, Simon Sinek gave a TED Talk titled, Start With Why.

You might have come across Simon Sinek. You might have heard the TED Talk. You might have read the book that came out the back of the TED Talk. 35 million people have watched it.

It's the third most popular TED Talk of all time. And it launched Simon Sinek's career as a kind of social commentator, business guru kind of guy.

[1 : 01] You might have seen him. Actually, a very famous clip went viral a number of years ago about how dreadfully terrible smartphones are for children. I commend it to you if you're not yet aware of it.

But Sinek's goal in the talk and in the subsequent book was to get business leaders and entrepreneurs away from thinking about, first of all, about what they do or how they do it.

But to begin with their purpose, their cause, the thing that drives the whole enterprise. Because, he argues, this is what it will take then to inspire action and create lasting impact.

And when you think about it, knowing your cause, knowing your purpose, your why, is, well, it doesn't just streamline the whole operation, but it explains why everything is done the way that it's done.

This morning, we're going to see God's why. We're going to see his purpose, the cause that underpins everything that he is doing.

[2 : 08] That's what lies behind the word at the start. Verse 16, 4. Here's the reason. In this way, the narrator, as it were, has stepped in to explain, to give a reason.

This is the why for everything that we've been told from chapter 1, verse 1 up to this point. So, why, chapter 1, did the eternal Son who was with God in the beginning, why did he take flesh and make his dwelling among humanity?

Why does he fulfill the Old Testament as the true and faithful Israelite, the true Son of God? Why, then, does he take, does he reveal his glory, chapter 2, and cleanse the temple?

Why does he tell us that he's going to be destroyed by, as we saw last week, being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness in the days of Moses, the one who is the source of healing and new life for all who will look to him?

Here's why. For God so loved the world. Everything that we've been told about God's mission to bring people into the kingdom, that was the language that Jesus used last week with Nicodemus, do you remember?

[3 : 20] Entering the kingdom of God. Everything that we've been told has been motivated by and rooted in this principle of divine love. This is the first mention of love in the gospel.

If you know anything about John's gospel, even if you don't, this verse, John 3, 16, is widely known by people of all kinds of beliefs and none. It is incredibly famous.

And yet, this is the very first mention of love in the gospel. And it's offered as God's why. If we want to know why God has acted in history the way he has, why Jesus made the monumental journey from heaven to earth, it can all be tracked back to this point.

God's love for the world. It is as simple as it is astonishing. And as we listen to John's commentary in these verses this morning, I want us to see that this passage reveals four aspects of the character of this love, which if we can grasp, if we can go away from here this morning, even with a

little bit more of a heart understanding of this, it will blow our minds.

If we can grasp these aspects of the character of God's love, it will blow our minds. So, first of all, I want us to see first that God's love is a love that gives.

[4 : 45] Point number one, it is a love that gives. Verse 16, for God so loved the world that he gave. When someone talks about love, how can you tell what they actually mean?

When someone says, I love you, all they have actually done is said something. It might be nice, and it might be especially nice if you feel the same way.

But beyond that, it's actually meaningless. Until that is, they back those words up. When I got together with my wife, we spent six months on different continents.

I wrote her three letters a week. Handwritten letters, three of them a week, and they weren't short. They were full of expressions of my love. Now, you could argue that the very act of writing so much was proof that I meant what I said.

But let's be honest, in reality, I could have written reams and reams and reams. But those words are empty if I don't act on them. If my life, if my behavior doesn't then match with the words, and how do I show that love, that sentiment, how do I show it most clearly?

[6 : 02] I give. Time, resources, effort directed towards her. The love of God is no different. It is expressed in his giving.

Do you think of God this way? Do you think of God as a God who gives? Many of us, you see, I think our default setting is that we think God wants to take from us.

He wants to take or even keep things that we want from us. He's a God who takes. He's crossed with us. I think lots of us, even as Christians, believe that we believe the story of Jesus has done us good, and that God has accepted us, but he's sort of grumpy with us.

He's accepting us through gritted teeth. And we think that anything that he gives us that is good, he's doing it in a sort of resentful kind of way. He's had his arm twisted up his back, as it were.

Let me say something to the teenagers. Perhaps you think this. You look at your friends who seem to be allowed to do what they want, go where they want, and all you hear is God saying no to you. Well, listen, lock it in now.

[7 : 19] Lock it in now in your mind and in your heart. God's love is expressed in giving. And we're going to see he doesn't give with a teaspoon. He gives with shovels.

He just gives and gives and gives. Anything, therefore, that he keeps from you simply cannot be for your good. God's love is a love that gives.

But it gives something very particular. Point number two. It is a love that gives its very best. God's love is a love that gives its best.

Verse 16. And for God so loved the world that he gave his only son. The love of God is seen most clearly in his giving of his son.

Now, the language here of only son doesn't refer to the number of children that God had. It's not that he gave the only child that he had. Rather, it is that Jesus is God's unique son.

[8 : 17] There is no one like him. He has no equal. He is the eternal son made flesh. He is, the apostle Paul says, the image, the exact representation of the invisible God.

Now, what this means is that God doesn't simply give his most treasured possession. He gave himself. And in essence, that's what true love always does.

We can give money. We can give gifts. We can do nice things. But to give oneself is the greatest gift. I read recently of a couple whose marriage was unraveling and they were in counseling.

And the husband was exasperated because he felt that he'd been generous and he'd provided in all kinds of ways. And at one point in their discussion, he said, I gave you a house. I gave you cars. I gave you holidays.

And when he'd finished speaking, there was a pause and his wife said, yes, you have given me those things. You've given me everything except yourself. In the end, that's what we want.

[9 : 17] Isn't it? We want the person. Because the greatest gift that anyone can give is themselves. And when we look at Jesus Christ, the one who is God incarnate, God in flesh, we see that that is exactly what God has done.

He gave his very best. He gave himself. By the way, although Jesus came into history that first Christmas, the apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 1 that God set his love on us before the foundation of the world.

Now, why do I mention that? Well, because you weren't around before the foundation of the world. So it wasn't that God then looked on and thought, I quite like them. I think I'll choose them. No. God set his love on those he chose before we ever existed. He loves us because he loves us. And what this means is his love is not responsive. Our love is always in response to something outside of us. We love on the basis of what we see or what we experience, whether it's looks or talent or privilege or scintillating wit or whatever it might be.

[10:28] It's not like that way. It's not that way for God. And that's good news because if those things can be lost, well, then God's love could change.

We might think like that, but it doesn't work that way. He acted in history motivated by a love that gives its best. And it's a settled love that doesn't need anything in us.

It was a love that was settled before anything existed. God's love is a love that gives its best. But love needs an object.

And that's where we go next. It's a love that gives its best for the world. 16 to 19. John has only used the term world once since the prologue, since chapter 1.

And yet in three verses he uses it five times. So he wants to make a point. 16. 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[11:37] For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. He's piling up references so that we get the point. Verse 19.

And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world. The reason that he repeats himself in this way is because it is so shocking. The world, for John, this language of world, it describes humanity in rebellion against God.

The world is the place where his own people reject Jesus. You remember chapter 1. It is where the religious establishment pursue him to death. It is, look at verse 19, where men and women love darkness because their deeds were evil.

The world, for John, describes humanity against its maker. So you'd think that would be the last place that God would go.

That would be the last place that he would direct this incredible love. He would see the rejection. He would see the rebellion. And he'd wash his hands of the whole sorry mess.

[12:46] He gave us everything that we have. Every breath in our lungs. Everything that we enjoy. And we turned our back on him. It is cosmic treason of the highest degree.

And so he would be entirely justified in verse 17. Look, to condemn. For all time. There would have been absolutely no undoing of justice if God had said, You want to live in my world on your terms? You want to take everything that I give without a word of thanks? Okay. Off you go into outer darkness. Cut off from my blessing forever.

If people want to choose darkness, It would be entirely fair for God to give it to them. To us. And yet, The God who gives his very best Does so for the sake of this rebellious world.

The world that has set itself up against him Is the very place to which he goes. The very people to whom he goes.

[14:04] That we might not be condemned. To be condemned would have been utterly fair. But he comes in order that that might not be the case. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, But in order that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus has come on a rescue mission. God gave his best for the worst of London.

The worst of healing. The worst of your street. Not to condemn them, But in order that they might see Christ as Savior And put their faith in him.

God will condemn and he will save according to his will. But this text is clear. God's heart is bent more towards salvation than condemnation. That is why he sent his son.

Therefore our prayers and our efforts to see him save our friends and colleagues. To move in a saving way in our communities. Should reflect that. For many of us I think we've become very pessimistic about whether God's going to save or not.

[15:14] These are difficult days for the gospel in Europe and in the UK. In lots of places across the western world. And we think well that's it. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world.

But in order that the world might be saved through him. He sent a savior. We need to remember that in our day. When the culture is going hard against God and his people. We can forget that the chief way among. The chief sorry. Among the ways that God transforms that kind of situation. Is through bringing those people to repentance. If we look at church history. There has been a decline in the spiritual vigor. The spiritual temperature of a particular place. And what is the decisive thing that changes it? Revival. Men and women. Boys and girls. Waking up to Christ. [16:14] God moving in power by his spirit. To show people that they have a savior. And that there is salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If God gave his best in order that the world might be saved. We should plead with him on that basis. Lord bring salvation to Ealing. To London. To the United Kingdom. Bring salvation to those people across the road that I know. That seem so hard to your gospel. Those people that I have been sharing Christ with for months, years, decades in some cases. You sent your son for that purpose. Would you please have mercy? God's love gives its best for the world. But all of this has more personal implications as well. God's love is a love that gives. God's love is a love that gives its best.

[17:13] God's love is a love that gives its best for the world. Number four. It is a love that gives its best for you. The general becomes personal in that word whoever.

Do you see that? It's repeated four times. 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 18. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.

But whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. It's again there in verse 21. The love of God doesn't sit on the shelf like a decoration.

Something that we can take or leave. Something that we can get together in a situation like this and talk about in the abstract. The love of God comes with moral obligations to respond. For you to respond. And John identifies three areas that we need to note. The first is he says see your need.

[18:16] Verse 18. See your need. Whoever believes in him is not condemned. But whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. It's very clear where our natural love of darkness leads us.

It's very obvious where our rebellion against God and his world takes us. Words like perish verse 16. Words like condemn verse 18. They might be hard to accept but they're not hard to understand. As I mentioned earlier whatever offense these words might cause us. However uncomfortable they make us. They are entirely reasonable in the light of the way we have treated God.

If you walk into somebody's house and you ignore them and you make a terrible mess. You would expect them to kick you out and to make you pay. It's no different with God.

There will be consequences for us messing up his house in the way that we have. In the way that we live in his world. The way that we treat other people. He doesn't look on that and say oh it's alright.

[19:25] So we must see that we have a great need for his love. The language is supposed to wake us up and think hang on this is serious.

Perish? Condemn? We need his love. We need his forgiveness. We need his grace. In fact he even pushes this further. Did you note verses 19 to 21.

Secondly he says see your heart. See your heart. This is the judgment. Light has come into the world. And people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his work should be exposed. Jesus the light of the world has come.

He has come into this world of darkness. And rather than people running to the light. They have chosen the darkness instead. Not because they can't see the light.

[20:26] But because the light reveals the truth about their lives. That's what he does. Jesus exposes us. He reveals the reality of our hearts.

And we would rather hold on to our sinful behavior than give it up. So we stay in the darkness. We do this because we don't want our lives to be exposed.

Because we're ashamed. Deep down we know that there's something wrong with us. We know that our hearts aren't ordered the way that they should be.

We know that there are things that we think and say and do that are wrong. We wish we didn't. But we know that it's there. And the Lord Jesus exposes that.

He comes as it were and shines light into that. And we don't like it. It's terrifying for us. The idea of being exposed. And so we're ashamed.

[21 : 25] A few years ago I was trying to hire a venue for an event that we were running in a previous church that I was at. And I went to a pub with a room at the back. And I saw it online. And I thought oh that room looks like it might work well for us.

And I contacted them. They said yeah come and have a look. And I went and I met the manager. And we had a walk around. And the room was great. But I noticed that there were lots of light bulbs. Just on the side on the windowsill and on the floor and things like that.

And I said why all the light bulbs? And he sort of laughed. And he said oh well people when they have a few drinks you know they want the lights off. And sort of winked at me.

We both knew what he was talking about. When people do wicked things they don't want the lights on. Because we feel a sense of shame. Shame is a deeply deeply destructive emotion.

It crushes people. Literally it is the leading cause of suicide. So the darkness feels safe. We would rather stay in the darkness because the thought that we might be ashamed is too much for us to bear.

[22 : 36] But also we choose the darkness because we like it. That's what he says isn't it? The problem with staying in the darkness is it doesn't deal with the problem.

It doesn't deal with that feeling. It doesn't deal with the shame and left alone shame simply multiplies and intensifies. No matter how hard you try and tell yourself that you're not a bad person. No matter how hard you try and convince yourself that the way that you're living is just the way everybody else lives. It's totally normal. I don't know why I feel this way. It's fine. I just need to think more positively about myself.

No matter how much we do that the thoughts always come back. The shame, the sense of guilt that comes with it they keep creeping back. What you need, what we need is forgiveness.

When you bring your shame into the light and you have the light chase the darkness. Verse 21, whoever does what is true, that is whoever submits their life to the truth of Christ.

[23 : 37] In the language of verse 17 it is whoever believes in him, whoever brings all their sin and shame to the one place that it can be dealt with. And that is to the God who loves with his best.

Whoever does that will discover that God deals with it all. What happens when light and darkness meet? Light always wins. You know that, don't you?

There's no such thing as a beam of darkness. Because when the light meets the darkness, the darkness disappears. It can't stand in the light. God deals with it all.

He forgives. He restores. And here's the thing. You won't perish. You won't be condemned. You will receive eternal life.

Let me say, you cannot deal with shame yourself like all of our sin. You can't deal with it yourself. We'll try all kinds of things.

[24 : 43] But I won't budge while you think you can deal with it yourself. Only God can deal with it. That explains what John is saying in verse 21.

When you do leave those things, those debilitating and condemning things behind, when you walk in freedom and joy, it is clear that God has done the work. When you experience freedom and joy that flows from forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only reason that that comes your way is because God has loved you.

He has demonstrated his love to you. And so, you can't do it yourself. But here's the thing.

Just because you can't do it doesn't mean that God doesn't do it. He can and he does. Some of you know this feeling.

You're enslaved to your sin. What I mean is, you know that it's there. You know that it's wrong and you can't let it go. And so, you want to keep it in the darkness. In some cases, you're living a double life.

[25 : 54] You know that there's this part of your life that's wrong and you feel shame, but you just keep it there and you put on a front for the rest of your life. You feel your need for cleansing, but the light feels too scary.

Let me encourage you this morning. No, let me urge you with all that I am this morning to go to Christ. Say to him, I have sinned and I deserve to perish. I realize that, but I believe it when you tell me that you love sinners. I believe it when you tell me that you sent your best, your son, the Lord Jesus, who was condemned in place of sinners like me, that I need not be condemned. And put your faith in him. You won't perish. You won't. You'll receive new life. You'll receive eternal life. Don't wait for anything. Allow the light of Christ to flood your life. Do it right now. In the quietness of your heart. And if you do that, it will actually set you free. God's love gives its best for you. [27 : 00] So see your need. See your heart. And respond in faith. Well, John takes us on the road in the following verses and he records a dialogue between John the Baptist and the disciples. We see that there in 25 and 26. They ask, what's going on with this Jesus who's baptizing John? Is he one of your rivals? Is there a problem here? And John says, verse 27, listen, it's all under the hand of God. And John the Baptist says, I'm not the Christ. I'm not the bridegroom. I'm not the one who this whole thing is about. In a wedding, you know, the bride and groom are there. They're the center of attention. He's saying, no, no, that's not me in this situation. I'm the friend of the bridegroom. I'm here just to make it all about him. And then he states his life mission. And this should be the mission of everyone who has come into the light, which is most of us this morning. He says, verse 30, see your mission. See your needs, see your heart. Thirdly, see your mission. He must increase, but I must decrease. Maybe the most succinct summary of what it means to live as a Christian. [28 : 09] He must increase. I must decrease. For John, this meant his ministry must serve and always give way to Christ's ministry. For us, it means that we get ourselves out of the way and we make our lives orbit around Jesus. If you want to know what your life goal is, lots of talk about that in our culture today. Start with why. What is the why of your life? The why of your life? Here it is. He must increase. I must decrease. But here's the thing. This actually happens. This reordering of things actually happens when you are gripped by the outrageous, generous, self-giving love of God. When you grasp that God so loved you that he sent his unique son, he gave his very best to save you from the darkness of your sin, to save you from a perished eternity under God's righteous condemnation, you're changed. When you grasp that, when you experience that in your heart, you're changed. Humility begins to grow. When you, to the degree, to the degree that your heart grasps that God's why for the mission of Jesus is this incredible love, your life will simply tilt on its axis. [29 : 28] You'll go from pushing yourself to the center of every chapter of your story to making your story all about him. He sets the course for your life. He gets the glory for your successes. You live your life in a spirit of gratitude. How could you not? At one point, rebelling aggressively against God, saying no to him and his world, he sends his son to die and rise, that you might be restored to God, that you might have eternal life. He sustains you every day. He gives you blessing upon blessing. He gives with shovels into your life, mercy and grace. How could you not live with gratitude? And when that hits your heart, you realize that you want him to take over more and more control of your life. You submit your desires and your thoughts and your actions. They're all surrendered to Jesus. He must increase. I must decrease. So how do you do it? Well, we go back to that love. Fill your gaze with Christ. Spend time with Christ. Plumb the depths of the love of God and let that love captivate your soul. [30 : 46] When you get on board with this, it transforms everything. Let's pray together.