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Bridgeway Church  
Gospel of John #10  
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## Sermon Summary #10

### Immeasurable Love, Unending Life John 3:16-21

I found myself this past week asking a question as I prepared for today: “How does one preach on a biblical text already known by virtually everyone in the world? What can one say that hasn’t already been said? How do I prevent people from mentally checking out because of their frustration at having to listen to yet one more sermon on a passage they committed to memory decades ago?” Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t have a good answer. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to skip over John 3:16 and pretend that all of you know everything that can be known about what is probably the most famous verse in all the Bible.

So here is what I propose to do today. I want us to look at 7 truths, 7 inescapable and eternally significant realities that together comprise this incredibly famous text. I hope that in doing so you will discover things you never thought about before. I know that in preparing this message, I did.

#### (1) *God’s Love*

Can anything more be said about the love of God that Christians don’t already know? As a matter of fact, yes! Perhaps the first thing I would point out is that God’s love is not uniform. That is to say, God loves different people and different things differently. That may surprise you, but consider this.

The Bible talks often of ***God’s love for his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Son’s love for the Father***. We read in [John 3:35](#): “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.” In [John 14:31](#), Jesus says, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” Again, in John 17:26, Jesus says he will make known the name of the Father so “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.” This is a dimension of divine love that is almost beyond comprehension. God loves us in spite of our sin, but there is no sin in the Godhead that might impede or limit the love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other.

Then, secondly, there is ***God’s love for his creation***. The psalmist declares that “the Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Ps. 145:9). Jesus, in Matthew 5:44-45, commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that we may be seen to be sons of our Father who is in heaven, “for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” God’s love leads him to make gracious provision even for those he created who hate him.

Then there is ***God’s love for the sinful fallen world***. That is what we find here in John 3:16. I’ll have more to say about this when we look at the word “world” and what John had in mind.

Fourth, there is ***God’s love for the nation Israel***. We read this in Deuteronomy 7: “The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you” ([Deut. 7:6-8](#)).

We read about this yet again in Deuteronomy 10:14-15. “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.” Neither of these texts means that everyone who was an Israelite was saved. We know that many within the nation were rebellious and hard-hearted and turned continually to idolatry. But God loved the nation as his covenant people and blessed them with countless privileges and promises. This doesn’t mean there is no sense in which God loved other nations. But he didn’t love them in the same way that he chose to love Israel.

Fifth and finally, there is **God's love for his elect, redeemed people**. This is a love that goes beyond merely providing physical blessings for them. This is the love that actually leads them into a saving relationship with him. When God loves someone in this way he goes beyond merely offering them eternal life. He actually works in their hearts to overcome their rebellion and unbelief and leads them to faith in Jesus.

This is what Paul had in mind in Ephesians 1:4b-5. There he said that "**in love he [God] predestined us** for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." Again, in Ephesians 2:4-5 he said: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the **great love with which he loved us**, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." This love is "great" because it actually leads God to cause us to come alive in faith and trust and joy in Jesus. This love conquers and overcomes spiritual death and gives new and eternal life.

## (2) The World

The second important truth in this passage is the way in which the object of God's love is described. John uses one word: "world" (*kosmos*). Many try to magnify God's love by pointing out how many people have lived in this world. "Just think," they say, "of the multitudes of men and women who have swarmed across the face of the earth. Oh, how great the love of God must be that it could encompass such a countless multitude."

I'm not so sure that is what John is saying here. I don't think we learn anything about God's love by counting heads. God's love is not magnified when we ask, "How many?" Rather, it is magnified when we ask, "What kind?" In other words, **the issue isn't quantity but quality**. The **nature** of the people whom God loves is crucial, not their **number**.

What makes John 3:16 and the love of God so marvelous is that he loved, of all things, "the world"! The contrast here is **moral**, not **mathematical**. The difference between God and the world isn't that God is one and the world is many. The difference, the contrast, is that God is holy and the world isn't! That's what makes his love so astounding.

The lover is righteous and the loved are not. **God loved the moral antithesis of himself!** Light loved darkness. Holiness loved wickedness. The immeasurably pure loved the indescribably defiled. Thus the "world" here is not to be thought of in terms of its **size** but in terms of its **sinfulness**. The point is not that the world is so big that it takes a great quantity of love to love it all. The point is that the world is so bad that takes an amazing kind of love to love it at all.

Not one of you here today who is married chose your spouse knowing that he/she hated and despised you. When asked by someone, "What are you looking for in a husband/wife," you didn't say: "Someone who is strong and attractive and wealthy and especially some who despises the mere thought of me." But God did! God loved a world that hated him. God chose to love his enemies. And how did he demonstrate this love? That brings us to our third great truth in this passage.

## (3) God Gave

God loved this world by giving to it the last thing it could ever deserve! "For God so loved the world that he **GAVE** his only Son." It's as if God the Father said to God the Son: "There is something I want you to do. This world of humanity is populated by people who hate me. They have rebelled against me. Every single one of them. They deserve nothing from me but eternal damnation. They deserve to perish. But I want you to go and become one of them and live the life they should have lived but didn't, and to die in their place the death they should have died so that I may give eternal life to as many as will accept my offer."

The death of God the Son, Jesus Christ, is the expression of the Father's love for those who hate him. Love is not something wrung from God's heart by the sufferings of his Son. Jesus doesn't plead from the cross, "Oh, Father, please love them now that I have died for them." No! The cross is not the attempt by Jesus to persuade or entice the Father to love us. The cross is the express manifestation of a love that the Father already had for this lost and dying world.

But don't think for a moment that it was only the love of the Father that led to the cross of Christ. The apostle Paul declared that "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself or me" (Gal. 2:20). The Father sent his Son who joyfully embraced the task because he loved those for whom he would die.

#### (4) *God's Son*

Muslims consider it blasphemy to suggest that God has a son. Many Mormons happily affirm that Jesus is God's son because they argue that God the Father, who has a literal, physical body, had sexual relations with Mary and she bore him a son, Jesus. But the teaching of Scripture is that the Sonship of the second person of the Trinity is an *eternal relation*. The Father has always been the Father of the Son and the Son has always been the Son of the Father. There has never been a time when either was neither. These terms are employed to highlight the intimate relationship that exists between the first and second persons of the Godhead.

Let's be careful we do not rush past the incredible reality that it was God's "*only Son*" whom he gave for us. It was his unique, special, only Son; the Son who above all others was near and dear to his heart. This truth is the basis for what Paul would say in Romans 8:32 – "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

I can well imagine that God might be willing to sacrifice an angel, even an archangel like Michael or an angel like Gabriel. I can see God sacrificing one of the four living creatures or one of the seraphim or cherubim. But his own, precious, most highly beloved Son? Yes!

As the consummate expression of his love for this fallen, defiant world of sinners God did not spare his own Son; he made the greatest sacrifice imaginable. We see the magnitude of his love when we see the precious, priceless value of the gift he gave.

#### (5) *The Necessity of Faith*

The eternal life that John describes here does not come automatically to all people. It is not bestowed on those who "behave" themselves or who first get their lives straightened out or who put everything in order. Eternal life is for anyone and everyone who "*believes*" in this gift of God's love, namely Jesus: who he is and what he has done to save sinners.

This offer is universal and indiscriminate. It extends to all people of both genders, from every ethnic group and socio-economic category. It extends to all manner of sinners: from the most scandalous to the seemingly saintly, from the bad to the very worst.

The truth and promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ are like *spiritual honey*. But how do I describe the taste of honey to someone who has no taste buds? I can break honey down into its many chemical constituents. I can describe for you its color and texture. But the only way for you to enjoy the taste of the honey of eternal life is actually to taste it. So, taste it! Believe in Jesus and you will find him sweet to your soul and the most satisfying person you've ever known.

In other words, believing in Jesus is more than merely agreeing in your head with the facts about Jesus. It does include that, but it goes far beyond mere intellectual assent. The demons believe true things about Jesus, but they are eternally lost (James 2:19). Believing also means savoring in the most deeply satisfying way all that God is for you in Jesus. It means you treasure the one you know. You prize him above all others. You enjoy him to the fullest degree. "It is coming to Christ and finding him true and satisfying to the deepest longings of the soul" (John Piper).

This mention of the necessity of believing takes us back into John 3:9-14, a passage that we only briefly touched on last week. I want us to look particularly at vv. 14-15.

The incident to which Jesus points is found in Numbers 21. The people of Israel had been traveling from Mount Hor near the Red Sea to the borders of Edom. As a result of the difficulties they encountered, they complained and grumbled against both God and Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food" (Num. 21:4). So God sent "fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died" (Num. 21:6). They are probably called "fiery" serpents because of the severe sting in their venom.

The people asked Moses to intercede for them, and he did. God instructed him to erect a pole with the figure of a serpent made of bronze at its top. Everyone bitten needed only to look to the bronze or brazen serpent and they would be healed.

We know this incident was a type or foreshadowing of the death of Jesus because Jesus himself says in v. 14, “*as*” Moses lifted up the serpent . . . “*so*” must the Son of Man be lifted up. What strikes many as odd is that if the bronze snake is portrayed as a curse, it would suggest that Jesus is being portrayed in the same way. And that is true. But listen carefully. *Jesus became a curse for us. Jesus became sin for us.* Paul said it in two places:

“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).

In becoming like the snake, he was the embodiment of our sin, and the embodiment of our curse. And in becoming sin and a curse for us, he took ours away. “Jesus, in the place of the snake, is the source of healing, the source of rescue from the poison of sin, and the wrath of God. Jesus is the source of eternal life” (John Piper).

But this deliverance from the poison of sin and the wrath of God that it brings *only comes through faith*. You must believe in Jesus. When the Son of Man, Jesus, is lifted up on the cross, you must look to him, hanging there as the substitutionary sacrifice for your sin, you must believe in him as the one who can save you from the poisonous venom of your moral and spiritual rebellion and the wrath of God that it provokes.

Before we leave this story, let me also point out what the people of Israel were *not* told to do. They were not encouraged to follow some path of self-reformation. They were not instructed to incorporate themselves into what someone has referred to as the SEFS: The Society for the Extermination of Fiery Serpents! They were not told to pray to the serpent on the pole, nor were they commanded to buy some relic of the serpent and reverence it in hopes of continued well-being. Sadly, some in Israel did precisely that, as we read in 2 Kings 18:4. There we read about the spiritual reforms instituted by Hezekiah:

“He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it” (2 Kings 18:4).

The point we are to glean from this is simple: *we are bitten with the poison of sin just as the Israelites were of the serpents. And just as they looked to the bronze serpent for physical healing we are to look to Jesus in faith for spiritual healing.*

So, as we turn our attention back to John 3:16 we see that believing in who Jesus is and what he has done is absolutely essential for salvation and eternal life. This emphasis on believing in John 3:16 means that *not everyone will benefit from God having sent his Son*. It is of benefit only for those who believe, that is, those who embrace him for who he claimed to be and who trust him for what he came to accomplish.

But why wouldn't everyone believe? Knowing what God is offering us in his Son, why wouldn't every person joyfully and instantly believe? The answer is given in vv. 19-21.

Let me illustrate what is being said. In 1960 there was a movie released called, “The Time Machine,” starring Rod Taylor. It was based on a novel written by H. G. Wells. Taylor portrayed a scientist who created a machine that would thrust him into either the future or into the past. As he traveled into the future, he encountered a strange group of people called the Morlocks. These mutants would only come out at night because the light of day and of the sun was painful and repelling. They would recoil when confronted with fire and return to the darkness of their caves to protect themselves from the light.

This is what John is telling us in vv. 19-21. *People reject the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ because they love spiritual and moral darkness*. They fear exposure (v. 20b) and shame and the light of truth. They prefer to remain in darkness “because their works are evil” (v. 19b). The bottom line is this: *people do not reject Christ and the gospel*

***and Christianity for intellectual reasons, but for moral reasons.*** It isn't that they lack evidence or think Christianity is logically incoherent. They reject Christ because to accept him and follow him means that they must abandon their sinful ways. And they prefer the immediate gratification and pleasures of sin above Jesus and the life that he offers. Or again, people reject Jesus Christ because they cherish the pleasures of sin more than they fear its consequences.

But what does John mean in v. 21? Is he saying that people believe in Jesus so that they might parade in self-righteous promotion all their good works? No. By God's grace we come to the light precisely so that it may be known that whatever we do, we do in God's strength and for God's glory.

#### (6) *The Peril of Perishing*

To perish is the opposite of experiencing eternal life. If you gain eternal life by believing in Jesus, you are assured by God that you will never perish.

But what does it mean to ***"perish"***? It does not mean that you cease to exist. It means that you remain under the condemnation of God's wrath and judgment. Twice in v. 18, John describes what happens if you persist in unbelief: you are condemned. Indeed, you are ***"condemned already"*** (v. 18). You stand condemned. God's sentence of judgment is on the unbeliever and remains there so long as he/she refuses to repent and believe.

Later, in John 3:36, we see this stated once again: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Unbelievers are already under condemnation and remain that way forever, unless they should believe. To remain under God's condemnation and judgment is to perish.

People often wonder why the sin of rejecting God and his gift of love in his Son, Jesus Christ, is so serious, indeed so serious that it merits condemnation and eternal perishing. It is because God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the most precious and most worthy and most excellent person in the universe. There is no limit to his beauty and value. Everything else in the universe is utterly dependent on him for its existence. We owe him perfect obedience, perfect love, perfect worship, honor, respect, and adoration. Thus to ignore him, neglect him, disobey him, and refuse to believe in the offer of life that comes from him is a sin deserving of infinite and eternal punishment.

#### (7) *Eternal Life*

What precisely is "eternal life"? Does this simply mean that if we believe in Jesus we will live forever? Is he referring here to the unending duration of our existence? No, it means far more than that, because everyone, even unbelievers, will live forever. Some will live forever in the presence of God in the new heavens and new earth while others will live forever in hell.

So "eternal life" must mean something more than simply always remaining alive. Surely there is a qualitative emphasis to these words. He's not talking so much about how long we will live but about the kind or quality of the life that we will experience forever. John's point here is that ***God's love has made provision through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to give those who believe an eternity of unbroken, unimaginably intimate, unfathomably satisfying fellowship with and enjoyment of God himself.***

Later, in his prayer to the Father as recorded in John 17, Jesus says something truly profound:

"And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Perhaps when you hear that Jesus is about to define or describe the essence of eternal life, you thought of walking on the streets of gold or never dying or never sinning or ruling over celestial kingdoms or judging angels or receiving a glorified body or flying to distant galaxies or . . . whatever. But Jesus says it consists primarily in knowing, loving, and enjoying God!

Don't ever forget that this eternal life is not something you have to wait until you die to inherit. It is yours ***now***, from the first moment you entrust yourself to Jesus in faith. In John 5:24 Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever

hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Notice the present possession of eternal life: not "will have" but now "has"! Yes, we who believe in Jesus must still die physically, but physical death in no way severs us from Christ or interrupts our eternal life in him. Jesus spoke these words to Martha as she mourned the death of her brother Lazarus:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die [physically], yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die [spiritually]" (John 11:25-26).

### *Conclusion*

D. L. Moody was famous for saying that written on the outside of the gate of heaven are the words, "Whosoever will may come." And on the other side of that gate, which you can read from the inside, is written: "Chosen before the foundation of the world." This passage in John's gospel, in fact, the entirety of John's gospel, is designed by the apostle to be read before you walk through the gate.

There is yet another story from the life and ministry of Moody that will drive home the urgency of your response to John 3:16.

Moody was preaching a series of messages in Chicago that were supposed to last for several weeks. On the first Sunday night, October 8, 1871, he spoke on the trial of Jesus before Pilate. He used Pilate's own words to appeal to his audience. You may recall that Pilate turned to the crowds and asked: "***Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?***" (Matt. 22:17). Moody then concluded his message by saying: "I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next Sunday we will come to the cross, and we will decide what to do with Jesus of Nazareth."

Moody later said that this was the greatest mistake of his life. For as the meeting was ending that night, the fire engines began to sound on the streets of Chicago. What has become known as the Great Chicago Fire had erupted. It destroyed more than 3½ square miles of Chicago's central business district. Moody's own home was burned to the ground. Over 1,000 people died and more than 100,000 were left homeless. Many to whom Moody spoke that night either died in the fire or never returned to hear him preach again. The gospel is not for "another time, another day, a more convenient moment." It is for now. Today. Not tomorrow. Look to the Son of God and live!

Now listen to me carefully. Your presence at Bridgeway today, July 7, 2019, means that when you stand before God at the throne of judgment, none of you will be able to say: "No one ever explained the gospel to me. No one ever told me that my eternal destiny was at stake. No one ever urged me to believe in Jesus Christ so that I might have eternal life." You have heard the gospel, and your eternity is at stake in your response.

So, what then will you do with Jesus, who is called the Christ?