

“If That Isn’t Love”

John 3:16-18

John "Grasshopper" Liggett died of cancer while serving a life sentence for murder. He never got to see the work for which he is now best known because he was buried three months before Ruth Graham's casket raised awareness of who he was in 2007. He built the caskets for Billy and Ruth Graham while serving time in Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola. With the passing of Billy Graham, much has surfaced about Liggett. His brother, John, said the incarcerated murderer was a changed man. While going through a box discovered at his mother's home, he found dozens of certificates confirming his study of God's Word and his involvement in church. The death of Dr. Graham revealed that a prisoner built his \$215 casket, and every picture of that simple pine box carries the message that no matter who you are or what you've done, God's eternal love and forgiveness are available to all. The man in the casket and the builder, whose name is engraved on it, lived very different lives on earth, but they are both now in the same place as brothers in Christ.

That, my friends, is the essence of the gospel, the reason for Easter and the hope in the resurrection. That God would love anyone is beyond my ability to comprehend. Oh, there are people who claim that they deserve God's love.

They try real hard to love others.

They try real hard to live a good life.

They go to church.

They give to charity.

They volunteer.

They pray.

They read their Bible.

They try to live by the golden rule.

But the cold, hard fact is that none of us deserve God's love.

We are described in the Bible as sinners.

It says there is no one who is righteous, not one.

It says we have a deceitful heart that is beyond cure.

The Apostle Paul stated he was a wretched man.

The Apostle Peter bitterly wept over denying Christ.

Judas, filled with regrettable remorse for betraying Christ, hanged himself.

The thief crucified next to Christ admitted that he was guilty and deserved his punishment.

When he looked at himself, David asked the question that really should be on the heart and lips of every person. “Who am I that God would consider me, that He would take a second look my way?”

At Friday's service I spoke of a stark reality. In some respects it's the giant elephant in the room that few want to talk about. What I shared was a hard slap to the face, something that jolts you, sobers you up. At the end of the trial before Jesus was taken and beaten before the crucifixion, Pilate made one last attempt to release Him since he didn't find anything that warranted the death penalty. But the religious rulers and the crowd insisted He be put to death.

Allow me to return to what I said Friday. Pilate found himself in a quandary. He knew Jesus to be innocent, but to release Him risked the infuriation of the religious leaders. Their displeasure meant the possibility of inciting a riot, which could cost Pilate the governorship in Judea.

Pilate had one more trick up his political sleeve. He cited a custom that was meant to be a goodwill gesture among the Jews during the Passover. It was a way of helping ease tensions between Rome and Judea. With one more opportunity to try and release himself from this volatile situation, he appealed to them for an exchange. The guilt of Jesus's crucifixion could be cast back onto the religious leaders. There was a custom of releasing a prisoner during the Passover week. Let them choose to condemn or release Jesus. “Would you like me to release Jesus?” “No, give us Barabbas.”

If it weren't for what Scripture tells us about him, we would be unfamiliar with Barabbas and his character. John tells us that he had taken part in a rebellion. He was a zealot, out to disrupt, even overthrow, if possible, the Roman government. He was an anarchist, a radical, a revolutionary.

Matthew says that he was a notorious prisoner.

Where John's biography about Barabbas is a bit sketchy, Luke provides some more insight into his character.

Luke 23:19 “Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for

murder.”

It doesn't say how many or who, but does it really matter? He had a cold heart, one that didn't think twice about taking a life, or clashing with the law. He was sentenced to die for his crimes. There were three crosses and four prisoners that were to be executed. One would be granted pardon by Pilate. He hoped it would be Jesus. Barabbas deserved the death penalty as did the other two criminals. One of them admitted his guilt while hanging on the cross waiting for his demise. “We deserve what we are getting” he said.

Here is what I find perplexing in the question put to the crowd. Given the character of the Jesus and Barabbas it seems clear who should be chosen. So just for a moment put yourself in the crowd that day standing before Pilate. The question has been put to you: “Who would you like me to release?”

Jesus was kind and loving not filled with hatred.
 Jesus healed people instead of hurting them.
 Jesus raised the dead instead of taking life.
 Jesus lived a righteous life instead of being rebellious.
 Jesus sought for reconciliation not revenge.

Jesus the guiltless or Barabbas the guilty
 Jesus the innocent or Barabbas the insurrectionist
 Jesus the sinless or Barabbas the sinner
 Jesus the righteous or Barabbas the rebellious
 Jesus the king or Barabbas the killer

For a moment, close your eyes and ponder that question.

Jesus or Barabbas
 Jesus or Barabbas
 Jesus or Barabbas

We would like to think we would choose right.
 We would like to think our response would fall on the side of truth and justice.

Now let this thought sink in: Barabbas is our representative. He is a picture of the world lost in

sin, condemned to die. Like him, we are all guilty and deserve the same judgment as he did.

We may not like Barabbas, but he is us.

We are Barabbas.

We are guilty.

We are sinners.

We deserve the death penalty, and truth be told if we were in the crowd that day, we would choose him too, because he is just like us.

But wait a minute. The one who is guilty is set free while the one who is guiltless is condemned. And that dear friends, is what happened on the cross.

Through the death of Christ we have been set free from sin through faith in Him, all because Jesus the innocent took the place of the guilty, all because God the Father chose Him to take the place of the sinner. If He didn't, we would forever remain condemned.

Barabbas should have had the cross occupied by Jesus. We should all occupy the cross that Jesus carried and hung on. We deserve to die the death Jesus died. We should have died for our own sins, but the great love story is that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us to demonstrate the love He and the Father have for us. He bore our sins in His body on the tree.

Speaking of the contrast between the two Herbert Lockyer writes: “What a picture of divine grace this substitutionary death presents.”

It doesn't make sense that the guilty would go free, but even though we know ourselves to be guilty we have been acquitted of the charges because Jesus took our place. The substitution of Jesus on the cross effectually released us from the penalty of our sin when we accept what He did by faith. The innocent Jesus was condemned as a sinner while the guilty sinner is set free. And that is why we can sing a song like Wonderful Grace of Jesus.

Wonderful grace of Jesus,
Greater than all my sin;

How shall my tongue describe it,
Where shall its praise begin?
Taking away my burden,
Setting my spirit free;
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Wonderful grace of Jesus,
Reaching to all the lost,
By it I have been pardoned,
Saved to the uttermost.
Chains have been torn asunder,
Giving me liberty;
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Wonderful grace of Jesus,
Reaching the most defiled,
By its transforming power,
Making him God's dear child,
Purchasing peace and heaven,
For all eternity;
And the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Refrain
Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus,
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea;
Wonderful grace, all sufficient for me, for even me.
Broader than the scope of my transgressions,
Greater far than all my sin and shame,
O magnify the precious Name of Jesus.
Praise His Name!

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The extent of God's love is seen in the grace He gives to any, to all who will believe. And yet we misunderstand God whose ways are unsearchable with a love that is unfathomable. Paul asks a rhetorical question: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" Who has known His heart? The truth of the matter is that God has loved us with an everlasting heart. I take that to mean that there has never been a time when God hasn't loved me. There has never been a time when He loves me more or less than at other times. His love remains unchanging and unwavering. His love is steadfast and is the reason for the crucifixion and the resurrection. And while His love is the reason for them, we are also the reason for the crucifixion and resurrection. God's great love devised a plan that included the cross. There wasn't any other way God could show us His love.

In our limited wisdom we might conclude the way in which God showed His love is a bit warped or twisted. Yet from God's perfect perspective what He did in sending Christ to the cross and Christ's obedient willingness to die is the ultimate expression of what love is.

From the opening words of the Bible in Genesis to the closing words in Revelation, the entire scope of Scripture defines and describes for us the height and depth and breadth and length of God's love. It is His love story for us shown in His willingness to die for us that we might in turn live with Him.

If there is a passage of scripture that encapsulates and summarizes the love God showed to us it is John 3:16-18. This is the depth and demonstration of God's love, His intentions toward mankind. His love is laid out for us in this passage. We see the cause of God's great love. We see the cost of God's great love. We see the clause in God's great love. We see the continuation of God's great love.

I. THE CAUSE OF GOD'S GREAT LOVE

Verse 16 begins with a deduction. It is this – there is God. He is real. He exists. Even the opening words of Scripture, "In the beginning God..." attest to the reality that before the universe began God existed. It doesn't mean in God's beginning, because He has no beginning. It means in the beginning of the world.

Without having to explain God it begins with an understanding that there was God. Scripture then helps us to see who He is. We learn about His unchanging characteristics or attributes. They are inherent to His nature, of who He is. We read, for example, in I John 4:8 that "God is love". It means that in His essential nature and in everything He does, the motive behind His actions, that God is loving. He embodies it. He defines it.

Our text begins by saying "For God so love". Paul says that God's love is great. That God exists is evident in what He does – He loves.

Let the reality of that simple but profound statement sink in. Roll it over in your mind a few times.

“For God so loved”

Say it with me “For God so loved”.

I hope you realize how much that says about God and His nature. God loved in this way.

The entire Bible explains God’s love for mankind in His plan to redeem sinners. Why? Because God loves. John MacArthur notes that if God only operated toward mankind based on the law He would have the right to convict us and we would be condemned to spend eternity in hell. But His love provided a remedy for sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross on behalf of everyone who repents of sin and trusts Him for salvation.

So here is God who loves and John 3:16 shows us the object of His great love.

“For God so loved the world.”

There are over 7.5 billion people in the world today. This verse says that God loves every one of them. That means everyone that was it in when it began, everyone who is born today and all the tomorrows – without exception. He doesn’t single out a group or society. He doesn’t love just a certain class of people or people in a particular time of history. He loves all.

If you didn’t know, we have two dogs. They are brother and sister. They have the same mother, but a different father. We got Blaze first as a puppy. He just turned one. Lucy came by adoption or rescue because the couple who had her needed to place her. It’s a longer story than that. Lucy is 4 or 5 tomorrow. I’ll be totally honest with you; I love Blaze more than I do Lucy. She does some things I’m not at all happy with. It’s not that Blaze is perfect. There are some days I’m ready to ship her back. There are days I’m close to losing my Christian sanctification over that dog. I don’t have a perfect love her; I hope that changes, but right now she’s making it pretty tough.

Now when it comes to people, God’s love is always perfect. That’s never changed. Someone once said that if you ever doubt God’s love, just look at the cross.

One day in the middle of a tremendous storm Peter took a step of faith and got out of his boat and walked on water toward Jesus, but the minute he took his eyes off Christ he began to sink. He believed his circumstances more than believing in Christ. It’s the same with God’s love. The minute we take our eyes off the cross we begin to doubt God’s love. So, my friends, always come back to the cross. It is the shelter in which we can hide, the place where His free grace is sufficient. If that isn’t love.

It is at the cross we come to see the enduring nature of God’s love, the cause for God’s love. It’s who He is and it’s what He does.

It is at the cross where we see the enduring nature of God’s grace.

It is at the cross where we see the burden of our sin rolled away.

So here I am. Here you are.

I tend to look at myself like I look at Blaze and think that I’m a pretty good guy, worthy of being loved, while on the other hand, I may tend to look at other people like Lucy and say they do stuff that makes me not love them. We may even think that God looks at people the same way. Yet we read here that God loves all the Blaze’s and Lucy’s of the world, everyone, equally and without exception.

Why? It’s because God is love. He loves in spite of the sin. Now, that doesn’t mean He loves the sin. On the contrary, He hates the sin, but He does love the sinner. How do we know that? Look no further than the cross. That’s what Paul said when he wrote that God showed us His love when we were still sinners and Christ died for us.

God loves because it’s His nature.

God loves because we need His love. Without it we would be condemned to an eternity separated from

Him existing in perpetual torment, pain and agony that will never cease. Without His love motivating Him to act on our behalf because of our sin our passage says we would perish, we stand condemned already.

That word does not mean annihilation. I take this with a little grain of salt coming from Yahoo news, but I read this past week that Pope Francis doesn't believe in hell. In a private meeting with a journalist from a liberal Italian newspaper when the conversation turned to what happens to people who don't repent, the Pope reportedly stated that they just disappear. If that's the case why believe anything. Just live however you want because you're just going to cease to exist for not believing.

Whether or not he actually said that may be debatable, but there are plenty of people, like atheist Richard Dawkins, who believes that we're just going to rot in the ground and since our brain and consciousness are attached we will cease to exist.

But that's not what the word means. In the context of the verse, it means to come to a final destiny of ruin in hell apart from God forever. So in God's great love the cause for Him sending His Son to die for us was so we would not perish, but have everlasting life. Peter tells us that He doesn't want anyone to perish. Not just the supposedly good people, but people like the Parkland shooter, the unbomber, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jung Un, your boss, a neighbor, you, me, all. Why did He do that? Because of His great love.

Love sent my Savior to die in my stead;
Why should He love me so?
Meekly to Calvary's cross He was led;
Why should He love me so?

Nails pierced His hands and His feet for my sin;
Why should He love me so?
He suffered sore my salvation to win;
Why should He love me so?

O how He agonized there in my place;
Why should He love me so?
Nothing withholding my sin to efface;
Why should He love me so?

Why should He love me so?
Why should He love me so?
Why should my Savior to Calvary go?
Why should He love me so?

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So here in this summary of the gospel is God's motivation toward people. He does not keep it a secret that He's crazy about you. He loves you and wants to give you everlasting life.

The cause of God's great love is seen first in His nature, in His person. The second cause of God's great love is seen in our position. We are sinners in a deplorable condition caused by sin that we couldn't do anything about but God who is rich in mercy did something that only He could do out of His great love, but to do that would incur a great cost.

II. THE COST OF GOD'S GREAT LOVE

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten (one of a kind) Son..."

What is the greatest thing of value that you have ever given to someone or hope to give someone, something that was a sacrifice to give?

I heard this week in the news that a middle school in Connecticut is planning to hold classes on Memorial Day due to the number of snow days they incurred this year. A lot of folks aren't happy. A lot of veterans aren't happy. They think it's a slap in the face of those who made the ultimate sacrifice by giving their life for the freedoms we enjoy. In a few moments we are going to celebrate communion. It's a reminder of the cost for our spiritual freedom, for our salvation. Paul says that our salvation was bought with a price. That price was the blood of Christ shed for you and me.

David Crowder wrote a wonderful song about the cost\ - who we are, what we have been given and what it cost for us to receive it.

You came for criminals and every Pharisee
 You came for hypocrites, even one like me
 You carried sin and shame the guilt of every man
 The weight of all I've done nailed into Your hands

Oh, Your love bled for me
 Oh, Your blood in crimson streams
 Oh, Your death is hell's defeat
 A cross meant to kill is my victory
 Behold the Lamb of God
 Who takes away our sin, who takes away our sin
 The holy Lamb of God
 Makes us alive again
 Makes us alive again

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God gave His Son to die for a world full of rebels and murderers and adulterers and liars and cheats – a world of sinners, a world He loved.

One author wrote “The manner of his love is not merely seen in the infinite value of what he gives — his only begotten Son — but in the rebelliousness of whom he gives him for.”

He died in order to give me victory.

Galatians 2:20 says He loved me and gave Himself for me. You were worth dying for. You were worth saving. You were worth His sacrifice, the great cost that even while still a sinner, He died for us. But there is a clause in that passage that affects the outcome.

III. THE CLAUSE IN GOD’S GREAT LOVE

While the Bible is clear that whosoever may come, we read that those who receive eternal life requires believing. “Whosoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

This isn’t just an intellectual understanding or acknowledgement of knowing about Jesus. Belief also means trust, to accept that what He did on the cross paid the debt of my sin and His resurrection assures me that His sacrifice was accepted by God as payment for my debt. Trusting or believing in Christ for salvation prevents my condemnation. Paul says there is therefore

now no condemnation to those who are in Christ. The cross meant to kill becomes my victory, my salvation. To believe is to have confidence that what God said is true and what Christ did is true. It believes in the promise of eternal life. You must believe that He is the only way of salvation from condemnation. In that gift is the continuation of God’s great love.

IV. THE CONTINUATION OF GOD’S GREAT LOVE

At the moment of believing you are given eternal life, an existence in God’s presence forever, an existence that will not end. Death and condemnation for sin have been swallowed up in victory. “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

On the Statue of Liberty we read these words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me, I light my lamp beside the golden shore.”

Two thousand years ago Jesus said “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

This isn’t a call to experience rest from the physical hardships of life that overwhelm us, but rest from sin through belief in Him. It is a call to experience God’s great love poured out through the sacrifice of His Son that you might not be condemned but receive everlasting life. Those who don’t believe in Christ better hope there is annihilation because God’s condemnation will be excruciating and like life for those who believe, that existence will also be eternal. So praise God for Easter. Praise God for the resurrection. Praise God for eternal life. Praise God for His Son, Jesus Christ. We celebrate His death and His resurrection. Without either there is no eternal life. He had to die for us in order to be raised again to give us new life, eternal life. If that isn’t love.