

**The Gospel of John (19);
“Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith” (part 2)**

Introduction:

Let us read once again **John 3:9-17**.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

³Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born ⁴again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

In addressing this subject last Lord’s Day, “**Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith**” (vs. 14f), we had hoped to consider this glorious, often quoted verse in the midst of this passage, which is **John 3:16**. We did not do so due to time constraints, and so today we will consider the meaning and the implications of this verse.

We should state at the outset of our study that though this verse is the most well-known and commonly cited verses in the Holy Bible, it is most commonly misunderstood and misapplied. There are false doctrines that are assumed to be true doctrines due to wrong interpretations of John 3:16. We will mention three of these false teachings. *First*, there is the common but errant belief based on this verse that **God loves all people everywhere in the same way and to the same degree**. Based on this verse, anyone and everyone is told,

“God loves you. Whether you are a Christian or not makes no difference, because God loves you unconditionally.”

But there is a great difference between saying that God has love for someone and that God has been loving towards someone. Let us affirm that the Holy Scriptures teach that God loves His people that are in Christ with a special, covenantal, eternal love, that He does not have for those who fail to believe on His Son. God calls His people in Christ “His beloved.” He never refers to the reprobate, such as Pharaoh, King Ahab,

Jezebel, or Simon Bar Jona, as His “beloved.” Yes, God is loving towards all, but it is not because He loves everyone alike, but because He is a God whose very nature is love.

A *second false doctrine* that is often argued as being supported by this verse is that everyone is capable of becoming saved, that *people have a free will and the ability to choose salvation for themselves*. The errant reasoning follows this way: “John 3:16 declares quite clearly that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life therefore anyone can believe of his own free will.” But this is false reasoning. Just because an invitation is given, “whoever will”, does not mean that “anyone can, that everyone is capable of believing.” No, due to sin nobody would believe the gospel to be saved. We have actually addressed this matter for several weeks. Our Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that he was incapable of entering the kingdom of God unless he was born again. It is impossible for a sinner to believe the gospel unless he is first born again. Of Apollos it was said, “he greatly helped those *who had believed through grace* (Acts 18:27). Sinners will not believe the gospel apart from the grace of God.

A *third false doctrine* that is very common in evangelicalism is that John 3:16 assures that anyone anywhere who accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior upon that *one-time decision* receives the gift of eternal life. Irrespective of anything else, people are told, “if you simply put your faith in Jesus Christ at this moment, if you really believe in your heart that Jesus is your personal Savior, you will become a Christian, you will receive the gift of eternal life and you will never perish.” John 3:16 does not teach this, as we will explain shortly.

Now in examining this verse, let us first be mindful of the grammar of the verse, what it is that is stated precisely. But then secondly we will examine what the Holy Scriptures teach regarding God’s loving action toward the entire human race. Thirdly, we will address God’s love for His elect, those who have been chosen in Jesus Christ from the foundation of the world, but we will need to address this last matter next Lord’s Day, Lord willing.

And so, let us first examine...

I. The grammar of John 3:16

There are several points of importance that may be affirmed by considering carefully the structure and grammar of this verse. First, we read,

A. “For God so loved the world...”

Here “God” here is a reference to God the Father. We read that God gave “His Son.” It was God the Father who gave His Son. We, of course, are Trinitarian in our understanding of the God of the Bible. There is one and only one living and true God. But this one eternal Being exists and manifests Himself in three Persons. Our confession of faith states it in this way:

In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.¹

And so, though there is but one God, we distinguish between the three Persons of the Trinity in the manner in which each Person relates to us. God the Father gave His Son to die for our sins.

¹ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Art. 1, Paragraph 3.

It is wrong in prayer to thank God the Father for dying for us. God the Father did not die for us. The Holy Spirit did not die for us. That is not what the Bible teaches. The Word of God tells us that God the Son died for us. The incarnate, eternal Son of God died with respect to His human nature, in order to make atonement for our sins.

B. We read that “For God so *loved* the world.”

Recognize that this word, “loved” is a verb, which is preceded by the adverb “so” to set forth the great degree which God “loved” the world. Here “loved” sets forth what God *did* for the world, not how God *feels* about the world. God was so loving to this fallen world in that He gave His Son to die so that believers could be and would be saved. (By the way, John 3:16 does not promise salvation for the world, but it does promise salvation for believers from the world.)

Many people have wrong views of God’s love based upon this verse. The problem on our part is that when we see the word “loved”, we think in terms of a feeling of affection rather than seeing this verb to be describing the kind of action performed. We assume that it is stating how God *feels* about this world, rather than what He has *done* for the world. This tendency that we have to think this way is largely due to the abiding influence of the Romantic Movement² that reshaped how western culture views love and romance. When we think of “love”, we immediately think of one’s feelings of affections rather than of one’s actions. And although the Bible certainly speaks in many places of loving affections, in many, if not most contexts, love, when it is in the form of a verb, describes the actions of someone toward another or others, not his feelings for them.

For example, when the Lord Jesus commands us as His disciples to love our enemies, He was *not* telling us that we are to have warm, fuzzy, feelings of affection for them. That is not natural or reasonable. He was commanding us to be loving in our actions toward them, even though they are our enemies. Luke 6 addresses this in verses 27 through 36, when we read of Jesus instructing His disciples:

²⁷“But I say to you who hear: ***Love your enemies***, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. ²⁹To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. ³¹And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

³²“But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. ³⁵***But love your enemies***, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. ³⁶Therefore be merciful, ***just as your Father also is merciful***.

Here Jesus initially commanded His disciples to love their enemies (v. 27). Then He listed a number of ways in which this is *done* (not *felt*). And then He repeated His command in verse 35 after stating how to love your enemies.

John 3:16 sets forth the loving action of God. It does not declare that people are lovely to God and that He longs for their friendship or fellowship, that they move Him to be favorable toward them. It says everything about who He is and of what He did in spite of who we are and what we have done. Here in John 3:16 “loved” is a verb. It describes what God did on behalf of sinners, not how He feels about them.

² The Romantic Movement emerged in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and peaked in the middle of the 19th century. Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism, on internal feeling and passion. It was born out of reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. But its legacy is that we tend to still think of “love” primarily in terms of internal feelings of affection rather than loving action toward others even though we may harbor intense feelings of animus towards them.

But it would seem that this verse is more often than not abused and twisted, so that unbelievers are told that God loves them *unconditionally*, and that He does not regard their sins nor is He angry at them for their rebellion. This should not be taught. It is a gross misrepresentation of God that is not true to the Scriptures. The psalmist declared, “God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day” (Psa. 7:11). Yes, God has been loving toward His enemies, but make no mistake, they are His enemies. They are under His infinite and eternal wrath unless and until they repent of their sin and believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The verse at the end of this chapter in which John 3:16 is located affirms this reality: “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*” (John 3:36). And every exhibition of God’s patience, extension of His mercy, every kind gift that He has bestowed upon them, is because God is a patient and loving God. And the greatest demonstration of His loving action toward the world is that He gave His Son that whoever believes on Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. But to fail or refuse to turn from sin and believe the gospel in disregard of His loving patience, aggravates one’s condemnation and calls forth for His stored up wrath to be unleashed on the Day of Judgment and throughout eternity.

Consider what the prophet Nahum declared about God:

²God is jealous, and the LORD avenges;
The LORD avenges and is furious.
The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries,
And He reserves wrath for His enemies;
³The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
And will not at all acquit the wicked.

The LORD has His way
In the whirlwind and in the storm,
And the clouds are the dust of His feet.
⁴He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
And dries up all the rivers.
Bashan and Carmel wither,
And the flower of Lebanon wilts.
⁵The mountains quake before Him,
The hills melt,
And the earth heaves at His presence,
Yes, the world and all who dwell in it.

⁶Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?
His fury is poured out like fire,
And the rocks are thrown down by Him.

⁷The LORD is good,
A stronghold in the day of trouble;
And He knows those who trust in Him.
⁸But with an overflowing flood
He will make an utter end of its place,
And darkness will pursue His enemies. (Nah. 1:2-8)

C. We read that “For God so loved the world.”

Here the “world” is set forth as having been the object of God’s loving action. Now the Holy Scriptures teach in many places that God has love for His people that is unique and special, a special love for them that He does not have for the world. We read that Christ loves His church, and gave Himself for it. We

read in John 13:1, “Then Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” God has a covenant love for His people that He does not have for any others. And so, when people come to John 3:16 which declares that “God so loved the world”, they attempt to understand what is being asserted. There are different opinions on how this is to be explained. Let us consider a few of these.

1. There are those that say that John 3:16 teaches that God loves everybody everywhere alike. This is error of course. **Arthur Pink** wrote of this:

God’s love toward all His creatures is the fundamental and favorite tenet of Universalists, Unitarians, and Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Spiritists, Russelites (JW’s), etc.” No matter how a man may live in open defiance of heaven, with no concern whatever for his soul’s eternal interests, still less for God’s glory, dying perhaps with an oath on his lips—notwithstanding, God loves him we are told. So widely has this dogma been proclaimed, and so comforting is it to the heart which is at enmity with God—we have little hope of convincing many of their error.³

We may add all Arminians to Pink’s list of those who espouse this interpretation all. They believe in a universal love of God for all mankind, that God loves everyone in the same way and to the same degree. The Bible does not teach this doctrine.

2. There are those that say that say that John 3:16 teaches that God loves His people from all over the world, not just Jewish people. In other words the word “world” is not to be understood as all humanity, but of His people comprised of those from the many nations of the world. This was the understanding of **John Gill** (1697-1771):

Our Lord was now discoursing with a Jewish Rabbi (i.e. Nicodemus), and that He is opposing a commonly received notion of theirs, that when the Messiah came, the Gentiles should have no benefit or advantage by Him, only the Israelites; so far should they be from it, that, according to their sense, the most dreadful judgments, calamities, and curses, should befall them; yea, hell and eternal damnation... Now, in opposition to such a notion, our Lord addresses this Jew; and it is as if He had said, you Rabbis say, that when the Messiah comes, only the Israelites, the peculiar favorites of God, shall share in the blessings that come by, and with Him; and that the Gentiles shall reap no advantage by Him, being hated of God, and rejected of Him: but I tell you, God has so loved the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, that He gave His only begotten Son; to, and for them, as well as for the Jews; to be a covenant of the people, the Gentiles, the Saviour of them, and a sacrifice for them; a gift which is a sufficient evidence of His love to them; it being a large and comprehensive one, an irreversible and unspeakable one; no other than His own Son by nature, of the same essence, perfections, and glory with Him; begotten by Him in a way inconceivable and expressible by mortals; and His only begotten one; the object of His love and delight, and in whom He is ever well pleased; and yet, such is His love to the Gentiles, as well as Jews, that He has given Him, in human nature, up, into the hands of men, and of justice, and to death itself.⁴

This is the view of many who are reformed. We understand that the Bible teaches that God has love for His elect, a love that He has for no one else but His chosen people. God loves them with a special, covenant love. He has loved them in Christ from the foundation of the world. It is not because the elect are more lovely or loveable, but because God set His love upon them in Christ before creation. And certainly the Holy Scriptures teach this truth. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). But God has purposed to have a people that He loves comprised of people from all over the world. They would argue, therefore, that the “world” of John 3:16 should be understood as the “world of believers”, ones whom God called forth from all the world.

³ Arthur Pink, **Does God Love Everyone?** (Chapel Library, 2000), p. 2.

⁴ John Gill, Commentary on John, at 3:16.

Again, **Arthur Pink** shows that the term “world” is a relative term that can mean different groups of people depending on the context in which the word “world” is found. Pink wrote:

The objector comes back to John 3:16 and says, “World means world.” True, but we have shown that “the world” does not mean the whole human family. The fact is that “the world” is used in a general way. When the brethren of Christ said, “Shew thyself to the world” (John 7:4), did they mean, “Shew thyself to all mankind”? When the Pharisees said, “Behold, the world has gone after Him” (John 12:19), did they mean that all the human family were flocking after Him? When the apostle wrote, “Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8), did he mean that the faith of the saints at Rome was the subject of conversation by every man, woman, and child in earth? When Revelation 13:3 informs us that “all the world wondered after the beast,” are we to understand that there will be no exceptions? These, and other passages which might be quoted, show that the term “the world” often has a relative, rather than an absolute force.⁵

But there is a third interpretation of John 3:16 that is *also held by those who are reformed*. They affirm that God has a covenant love that is for His elect, and yet they would say that...

3. John 3:16 teaches that God is loving toward all people, that He has a general benevolence for all people, because He made them, though He has a special covenant love for His elect.

J. C. Ryle and Matthew Henry advocated this understanding. **Matthew Henry** wrote:

Herein God has commended his *love to the world*: God so *loved the world*, so really, so richly. Now his creatures shall see that he loves them, and wishes them well. He so loved the world of fallen man as he did not love that of fallen angels (see Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). Behold, and wonder, that the *great God* should love such a *worthless* world! That the *holy God* should love such a *wicked* world with a love of good will, when he could not look upon it with any complacency. This was a *time of love indeed* (Ezek. 16:6, 8). The Jews vainly conceited that the Messiah should be sent only in love to *their nation*, and to advance them upon the ruins of their neighbours; but Christ tells them that he came in love to the *whole world*, Gentiles as well as Jews (1 John 2:2). Though many of the world of mankind perish, yet God’s giving his only-begotten Son was an instance of his love to the whole world, because through him there is a *general offer* of life and salvation made to all. It is love to the revolted rebellious province to issue out a proclamation of pardon and indemnity to all that will come in, plead it upon their knees, and return to their allegiance. *So far God loved the apostate lapsed world* that he sent his Son with this fair proposal, that *whosoever believes in him*, one or other, *shall not perish*. *Salvation* has been of the Jews, but now *Christ is known as salvation to the ends of the earth, a common salvation*.⁶

J. C. Ryle was more direct than Matthew Henry:

Nicodemus probably thought, like many Jews, that God’s purposes of mercy were entirely confined to His chosen people Israel, and that when the Messiah appeared, He would appear only for the special benefit of the Jewish nation. Our Lord here declares to him that God loves all the world, without any exception; that the Messiah, the only begotten Son of God, is the Father’s gift to the whole family of Adam; and that every one, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes on Him for salvation, may have eternal life.—A more startling declaration to the ears of a rigid Pharisee it is impossible to conceive! A more wonderful verse is not to be found in the Bible! That God should love such a wicked world as this, and not hate it,—that He should love it so as to provide salvation,—that in order to provide salvation He should give, not an angel, or any created being, but such a priceless gift as His only begotten Son,—that

⁵ Pink, pp. 5f.

⁶ Matthew Henry on John 3:16.

this great salvation should be freely offered to every one that believeth,--all, all this wonderful indeed! This was indeed a “heavenly thing.”⁷

We will consider one more opinion, which is also from a reformed commentator, **F. F. Bruce**.

If there is one sentence more than another which sums up the message of the Fourth Gospel, it is this. The love of God is limitless; it embraces all mankind. No sacrifice was too great to bring its unmeasured intensity home to men and women: the best that God had to give, he gave – his only Son, his well-beloved. Nor was it for one nation or group that he was given: he was given so that all, without distinction or exception, who repose their faith on him, might be rescued from destruction and blessed with the life that is life indeed. The gospel of salvation and life has its source in the love of God. The essence of the saving message is made unmistakably plain, in language which people of all races, cultures and times can grasp, and so effectively is it set forth in these words that many more, probably, have found their way of life through them than through any other biblical text.⁸

How may we best understand this important matter of the love of God for the world? The Bible pronounces and illustrates throughout its pages that our God is a loving God. This is a truth that rings clear and true, and acknowledged by all who call themselves Christians. But though the truth is commonly held and commonly affirmed, it is a subject that is commonly misunderstood. False assumptions are held; false assertions are made about God’s love. **J. I. Packer** described it this way.

St. John’s twice-repeated statement, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), is one of the most tremendous utterances of the Bible--and also one of the most misunderstood. False ideas have grown up round it like a hedge of thorns, hiding its real meaning from view, and it is no small task cutting through this tangle of mental undergrowth.⁹

Sadly, many take the thought that God is love and then run with it, forming all manner of false thoughts about the nature of God and His ways among the peoples of the earth. The Bible states that God is love, but the Bible also defines what that love is like. “Scripture does not merely say ‘God is love’ and leave it to the individual to interpret subjectively what that means.”¹⁰ Many, however, have done this. They suggest that because God is love, that He is easy to mollify toward sin and sinners. He does not look upon sin as a great evil to be punished with His eternal wrath, but merely as an unfortunate malady that needs healing. They then take their shallow, skewed concept of divine love and apply it as a means to justify their behavior and to form and shape a “christianity” that suits them.

They envision God as a benign heavenly grandfather--tolerant, affable, lenient, permissive, devoid of any real displeasure over sin, who without consideration of His holiness will benignly pass over sin and accept people as they are.¹¹

Perhaps the cause of greatest confusion about this subject is due to the failure to distinguish the *special love* that God has for His chosen people, over against the *general love* that He manifests for the whole world. There is a tendency for people to assume that God loves all people alike; consequently, they draw wrong conclusions about how God views people and how they relate to Him. Granted, there is a general love that God has for mankind, but there is a special love, a redeeming love, that unbelievers will never know for its objects are God’s people only. In our treatment of this subject we will, therefore, attempt to distinguish

⁷ Ryle, pp. 157f.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 89f.

⁹ J. I. Packer, **Knowing God** (Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 117.

¹⁰ MacArthur, **Love**, p. 35.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

between these two aspects of God's love as they are presented in the Holy Scriptures. But before we do, we need to address one more point of grammar in this verse.

D. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The word "believes" is a verb that sets forth what needs to be done in order not to perish but to have everlasting life. Every verb has tense. In English we speak of past tense, present tense, and future tense. There are other tenses, but these are the ones we think and use the most. In English we think of tense primarily in terms of time. But tense in the Greek language, which was the language that John the Apostle originally penned this Gospel, is not primarily concerned about time—when the action took place-- but of *the kind of action* that the subject of the sentence performs.

Tense is the most distinctive element in the Greek verb. Tense is concerned with the kind of action being performed. In contrast to English usage, time of action is secondary in importance... The student must keep in mind that tense in Greek is concerned primarily with the kind of action. Basically, there are three kinds of action that can be shown in a verb. First, action may be shown as continuous or durative... Durative action is shown by the present and imperfect tenses.¹²

The word "believes" in John 3:16 is a present tense verb which emphasizes durative or continuous action. In other words, John 3:16 does not support a one-time decision to "accept Christ." What is stated is that the "believer", in other words, "the one who continues to believe", is promised that he will not perish but have everlasting life. It is not so important when you first believed or that at a specific time you believed on Jesus. What is critically important is that you are a believer today, and by the grace of God you will be a believer tomorrow, and next week, and next year, even unto the coming of the Lord. John 3:16 is a promise to believers, not to those who at one time believed, or said they did. There is no promise of salvation in the Bible for a one-time decision to believe on Jesus Christ.

The same durative force of the present tense verb is seen in Romans 10:13 which reads, "For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." The verb "calls" is in the present tense. It is not a promise to a sinner who makes a one-time "sinner's prayer", but it is the promise of God to a believer whose life is characterized by calling on the Lord—present tense—; that one will be saved from his sin on the Day of Judgment.

To summarize John 3:16 in the light of its grammar, we can say that this is a declaration that God has been so loving to the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that any sinner anywhere, if he becomes a believer and continues to be a believer in Jesus Christ, he will never perish, but will have everlasting life.

II. What the Holy Scriptures teach regarding God's loving action toward the entire human race.

We mentioned the need to distinguish between the *general love* that God shows to all people and the *special love* that He has only for His people. There is a sense in which God loves generally all that He has created. When God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, He pronounced them good. Genesis 1:31 reads, "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." God was well pleased with His creation and delighted in it. He is said to "rejoice over all His works" (Psa. 104:31). He loves all that He has made because all things reflect in a measure His glory, who He is and what He is like.

God delights particularly in the intelligent creatures He made, both angels and people. They are objects of His attention, concern, protection and provision. God has a general love to all men, because they are *His* creatures, *His* offspring, and the work of *His* hands. We read of God's concern for them in Acts

¹² This statement was in the Greek grammar that my professor in seminary had written: Dr. Clayton Harrop.

17:28, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’”

God is loving not just to His people, but is loving (in His treatment) to *all* people. Earlier we considered the commandment of our Lord for His disciples to love their enemies:

But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? ⁴⁸Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matt. 5:44f)

We are to love our enemies because we are to be like our Father who is loving to His enemies. How is this general love of God manifested to all the world?

A. God’s (general) love for sinners is seen in that *He is gracious to sinners.*

There is nothing in fallen man that moves God to extend His grace to them. Sin has rendered mankind itself odious to our holy God. Here is a common error: many assume that God loves sinners because there is something lovely that elicits His affection for them. God is gracious toward fallen man because God is loving, not because fallen man is loveable. The very nature of grace suggests that His favor is extended apart from merit. When we read of how sin is depicted in the Scriptures before a holy God, then this false notion will dissipate. There are many metaphors in the Bible used to depict sin as hideous:

- (1) the scum of a seething pot in which is a detestable carcass (Ezek. 24:10-12)
- (2) the blood and pollution of a newborn child, before it is washed and clothed (Ezek. 16:4, 6)
- (3) a dead and rotting body (Rom. 7:24)
- (4) the noisome stench and poisonous fumes from the mouth of an open sepluchre (Rom. 3:13)
- (5) the lusts of the devil (John 8:44)
- (6) putrefying sores (Isa. 1:5, 6)
- (7) a menstruous cloth (Isa. 3:22; Lam. 1:17)
- (8) a canker, or gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17)
- (9) the dung of filthy creatures (Phil. 3:8)
- (10) the vomit of a dog and the wallowing of a sow in the sinking mire (2 Pet 2:22)¹³

People generally do not question that God is gracious, but few have any understanding as to what that means. It is as though they think, “Why would God not be gracious to us?” But the Bible reveals that it is an amazing wonder for God to be gracious to sinners

B. God’s (general) love for sinners is seen in that *He is merciful to sinners.*

There is nothing in fallen man that warrants God to extend mercy to him. By its very nature, mercy is undeserved. Mercy cannot be demanded; it must be freely bestowed by God. Mercy is God not giving people what they deserve. Sinners deserve God’s eternal displeasure and punishment. That God grants them time and opportunity to repent, is great mercy, totally undeserved by them. It is due solely to the love of God that He does not immediately bring history to a close and pour out His wrath upon this world.

C. God’s (general) love for sinners is seen in that *He is slow to anger.*

¹³ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures*, p. 107.

God's love for sinners is manifest in His patience toward them. We see God's patience displayed in our Lord Jesus' words pronounced over rebellious Jerusalem.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like unto whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets, and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets."

Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are the sons of those who killed the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come on you all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 23:37-47)

Several points may be made with respect to this passage:

1. Although these people were guilty sinners deserving of God's wrath, ***God desired their well being.*** He continually sent messengers to them informing them of their sin and calling upon them to turn back to God.

2. God had been ***slow to anger*** with respect to them. The sins mentioned by our Lord were committed over the course of centuries.

3. God's patience with them did not lessen their punishment, but rather ***their lack of response to God's patient dealing with them compounded their guilt, aggravating their condemnation.*** God does not immediately pour out His wrath upon sinners because He is patient toward them.

4. But God's love is seen even toward them, in that ***He continually desired their repentance from sin and turning back to Him right to the end.***

D. God's (general) love for sinners is shown in that *He is abundant in lovingkindness.*

God is good even to His enemies. We might illustrate this from the life of Elisha. In 2 Kings 6 we read of God's lovingkindness extended through His prophet to sinners who were bent on destroying His prophet. Elisha was a seer, who could know the King of Syria's war strategy so as to warn Israel and facilitate their preservation. The king of Syria heard this and sought to capture Elisha. We read of what happened in **2 Kings 6:14-23**. God blinded the armies that surrounded Elisha's house. Elisha then led them into the city of Samaria before the King of Israel. This blind army was helpless and vulnerable. We then read in verse 21ff:

²¹Now when the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, "My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

²²But he answered, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow? Set food and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to

their master.”²³ Then he prepared a great feast for them; and after they ate and drank, he sent them away and they went to their master. So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel.

Similarly, all through history God has dealt very mercifully and patiently with His enemies. God is abundant in lovingkindness.

E. God’s (general) love for sinners is God is seen in that *He relents from doing harm.*

We read in the Scriptures that God does not take pleasure in pouring out His wrath upon sinners. Do not misunderstand; He makes no apology for it. He is right in doing so. But He does not delight in doing so. To rebellious Israel, God declared:

Say unto them, “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Eze. 33:11)

F. The epitome of God’s (general) love toward sinners is that *He gave His Son to die, so that sinners might be saved.*

We read of this, of course, throughout Scripture, but perhaps most clearly in John 3:16, 17.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Here we see the full love of God toward sinners manifested. We see in His giving of His Son that indeed He is a *gracious* and *merciful* God, *slow to anger* and *abundant in lovingkindness*, one *who relents from doing harm*. That He would make a way of escape for guilty sinners through bearing God’s wrath due them, is love in action.

Three concluding thoughts, then we will close:

(1) The nature of God’s love gives hope to poor, needy, repentant sinners.

Sinners may take heart in that God will receive them for Christ’s sake. Although they are deserving of His wrath, He freely offers pardon and peace to them through Christ.

(2) The nature of God’s love aggravates the condemnation of unbelievers.

Herein is the great mistake. Most people in our land know and, I would venture to say, even believe John 3:16. They falsely assume, however, that this lessens their responsibility and culpability before God. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is only good news to believing sinners. John 3:16 will be the basis of God’s greatest condemnation of sinners on the Day of Judgment. To know the love of God in Christ but not to respond to it, aggravates to unimaginable proportions the guilt of sinners.

Our Lord responded to unbelievers who heard Him personally and yet did not believe on Him. We read in Matthew 11:20ff:

Then began He (Jesus) to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: “Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the Day of Judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the

mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the Day of Judgment, than for thee.

So we read of the great condemnation of those who hear of the way of salvation through Christ and yet refuse to believe: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).

3. The nature of the general love of God for sinners is insufficient to save sinners. All of what we have set forward today about the love of God deals with externals only. All of what we have said has been a description of what God does *toward* man, but unless God does something *in* fallen man and *for him*, it will avail nothing; he will perish in his sin. *For the general love of God for sinners that make available salvation for anyone, secures salvation for no one. Only those who are then objects of His special, covenant love are the objects of His saving grace.* Immediately following the pronouncement of judgment on Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jesus uttered this prayer to His Father:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

Now we have been addressing God’s general love for all people everywhere. But there is a love of God of an entirely different nature; it is special and specific, rather than general and universal. This is the love that God has for His elect. He has loved them since He first chose them and predestinated them to be saved from their sin and to become conformed to His dear Son whom He loves with a deep, endearing affection. His love for His people who are redeemed through faith in Jesus Christ is not because they are more loveable than those who die in their sins, but because God the Father sees them in union with His Son, God loves them as dearly as He loves His Son. We will speak of this special, covenantal love of God for His people next week, Lord willing.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.
The Lord be with you all. (2 Thess. 3:16)
