

Lesson 13

Does God Love The World?

This week's message on God's love for the world is a sequel to "God Is Love" which I preached last week. From last week's message, we can draw three basic conclusions: (1) God is love and He loves whom He pleases; (2) God loves sinful men in Christ; (3) God will love any person who turns to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance.

The crux of the controversy as to whether God loves the whole world centers around John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This verse has lost its meaning for many because it is not read in context nor are concepts in this verse compared with other Scriptures. The average person believes that God is only love and He would not send anyone to hell. He usually turns to John 3:16 to make his point. If an unbeliever is going to know any verse in the Bible, it is John 3:16. Unfortunately, most people think John 3:16 teaches, "For God so loved everybody that He gave His only begotten Son for everybody, that everybody might be saved." If John 3:16 teaches this, then we have pure universalism and evangelical Christianity has no message for the world.

One of the most popular beliefs of our day is that God loves everyone indiscriminately. The fact that this wrong concept is so popular with all classes of people ought to cause us to be suspicious of this teaching. God's love for everybody is the fundamental and favorite tenet of Universalists, Unitarians, Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Spiritualists, Jehovah Witnesses, Modernists, Liberals and One-Worlders.

To take a stand and say that God does not love everyone indiscriminately, leaves a person open to vicious criticism, not only from the unbelieving world but also from many within the believing world, for much modernistic thinking has subtly crept into our evangelical churches. The idea that God loves the whole world indiscriminately cannot be found in the writings of the early Church Fathers, nor in any teachings of the Reformers, nor in any Puritan works. The emphasis of the historic evangelical Church has been God's wrath for the unbelieving world and God's love for the believing world.

THE PROBLEM

If we did not have John 3:16 in the Bible, no one probably would have ever concluded that God loved the world indiscriminately, for this (and the story of the Rich Young Ruler in Mark 10:21) are the only verses in the Bible that implies He does. All other verses where God's love is referred to are related to God's people either in eternity, or while they were sinners before conversion, or when Christ died for them at the Cross, or God's present love for His own.

No evangelical Christian, no matter what his theological position may be believes that God loves every person in the world with the same kind of love with which He loves a Christian. If God loves everybody with an equal degree and intensity of love, then there is absolutely no advantage to being a Christian. If God loves every individual in this world in the same way, then the Bible teaches universalism. If God has fixed His redemptive love upon all men, then all men will ultimately be saved, for God's purposes cannot be frustrated.

Bible-believing Christians do not believe John 3:16 teaches that all men are going to be saved because God loves all men. This verse is obviously open to interpretation, and Bible scholars seeking to avoid universalism have approached this problem by either giving a limited meaning to the word "loved" or a limited meaning to the word "world." There must be a defining of terms and comparing Scripture with Scripture when interpreting John 3:16.

VIEW #1: GOD HAS A GENERAL LOVE FOR THE WORLD

Those who limit the word "love" in John 3:16 believe that God has a general, non-redemptive love towards all men because men are God's creation. The word "world" is taken to be mankind in general. This general, common love for the world deals with God's desire and not His decree (plan). God has not foreordained all men to be saved. All men in God's secret plan will not be saved, but His general love desires that all men be saved even though in His secret counsels all men will not be saved. There is, however, eternal punishment for those who despise God and continue in their rebellion against Him, and the Lord God has purposed and promised to carry out that punishment. Yet, the Lord never delights in the destruction of His creatures, and He desires or wishes all men in this world to repent and be saved.

The advocates of this view hold that God does love the saints (Christians) with a special, particular, redemptive love which He fixes upon them in grace and brings them to salvation through Christ. God's distinguishing love for His elect begins to appear when He effectually calls men into union with Christ. God's redemptive love for some is displayed as he begins to draw on them for salvation, enabling them to respond to the gospel offer.

God's common or general love for all mankind stops at hell. Hell is the place where the last inkling of God's favor is removed. How it is possible for God to love and hate sinful men at the same time is a great mystery but the Bible teaches it. For instance, we know that God is angry with the elect before salvation and at the same time He fully purposed to redeem them.

"Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." (Eph. 2:3)

Christians before conversion were "***objects of wrath***" among the unsaved. God is angry with sinners who are going to be saved in the same way He is angry with the reprobate; yet, at the same time He has electing love for some sinners not yet regenerate. If God can be angry with the elect while they are yet in their sins, then He surely can love all mankind as His creatures with a common, general, non-redemptive love and still have His wrath burn hot against them.

A very strong argument that God has a general love with no redemptive designs for the unsaved is found in the story of the "Rich Young Ruler." While he was a rejecter, it says that Christ loved him.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21)

Those who believe that God has no general love for the unsaved world have said that the word for love is agape, referring to redemptive love; therefore, they have deduced that the rich young ruler was among the elect and later did receive Christ. This, however, is an argument from silence and cannot be sustained from the Bible itself.

God’s great manifestation of His love was at the Cross. The Lamb of God was slain at Calvary to be an exhibition of God’s love for the world in general. God gave His Son, Jesus Christ, that “whosoever” or “everyone” who believes in the Son should not perish in sin but have everlasting life. Those who hold this view feel that the general offer of the gospel is more sincere if God has a general love for the world, but His special, particular or redemptive love is found only in His Son for those who respond by faith.

“Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’” (Ezk. 33:11)

“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” (Isa. 45:22)

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30)

There are some objections to the viewpoint that God has a general love for all mankind, but none that make it totally untenable.

1. The word “love” is agape, which, when speaking of God’s love for men is usually redemptive in nature so it is forcing the text to limit the full meaning of agape love.
2. Verse 17 says specifically that the design, purpose or intent of sending His Son into the world was to save the world – ***“that (for the purpose that) the world through him might be saved.”*** This is a purpose clause in the Greek. If the word “world” means all mankind then we are forced to draw two basic conclusions: (1) God could not carry out His own purposes which denies His sovereignty and lowers the value of the Cross, for it is obvious the whole world is not saved; or (2) The whole world will be saved which contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible which states that the whole world will not be saved. Those who believe that God has a general love for all men would answer this objection by saying that this context is talking about the potential to save the world but actually the world will not be saved because not all will believe.
3. Verse 17 also states that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn or judge it. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that God will judge the unsaved world on the basis of the person and work of Christ.

“And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”
(John 5:27-30)

“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

What kind of a world will not be judged by Christ? Only the believing world will not experience judgment. (Rom. 8:1)

4. It is very difficult to make a distinction between what God decrees and what He desires. Surely a sovereign God can bring about all of His desires. (cf. Job 23:13; Psa. 132:13, 14)

VIEW #2: GOD HAS A REDEMPTIVE LOVE FOR ALL IN THE WORLD WHO BELIEVE

It is quite possible to give a limited meaning to the word “world” so as to make it refer to all in the world who believe or the world of the elect.

Many men have honest questions over John 3:16. Does God love all sinners with agape love? If God loves all sinners, how do we explain His actions in the Old Testament? Did God love the Amalekites?

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.’” (Exo. 17:14)

Did God love the Canaanites whom He commanded to be exterminated without mercy?

“However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes.” (Deut. 20:16)

Does God love those who love violence?

“And the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.” (Psa. 11:5)

If John 3:16 says God loves the world, then John 3:36 says His wrath abides upon all in the world who do not have Christ. Is the wrath of God and the love of God abiding on the same person at the same time? Also, this is agape love which is the same word used for God's love for His own.

Perhaps an answer may be found in limiting the word "world." By taking a concordance you will find that there are over ten meanings for this word "world." (kosmos)

1. The world system.

"Do not love the world or anything in the world." (1 John 2:15)

2. The Roman world.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." (Luke 2:1)

3. The world where the gospel was preached.

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world." (Rom. 1:8)

4. The universe.

"He was in the world, and though the world (universe) was made through him, the world did not recognize him." (John 1:10)

5. The earth.

"He was in the world (earth), and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him." (John 1:10)

6. The world of mankind.

"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." (Rom. 5:12)

7. The world of Gentiles.

“But if their (Jews) transgression means riches for the world (Gentiles), and their (Jews) loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!” (Rom. 11:12)

8. The world of the reprobate.

“I pray for them (believers). I am not praying for the world (unbelievers), but for those you have given me, for they are yours. (John 17:9)

9. The world of unbelievers.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” (John 15:18)

10. We are told specifically that there is a world of the ungodly.

“... He did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people (world of the ungodly)” (2 Pet. 2:5)

It would be honest, therefore, to ask ourselves if the word “world” is ever used of the world of the godly or the world of the elect. John 6:33 must be taken as the world of believers or we have universalism, for all men do not have spiritual life.

“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven (Christ), and gives life to the world.”

John 1:29 teaches that Christ takes away the sins of the world.

“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Did Christ take away the sins of the world in the same way he took away my sins and your sins as Christians? If so, then all must be saved. Obviously, John is speaking about all in the world who will believe in Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:19 says that ***“God was reconciling the***

world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. Notice carefully the qualifying statement after world, ***“not counting men's sins against them.”*** God has laid the sins of believers on Christ, not counting them to their account. This must refer to the sins of true believers. If unbelievers do not have their sin charged to their account, then they will ultimately be saved, which makes a mockery of the finished work of Christ.

Perhaps it is then legitimate to take the word “world” in John 3:16 and make it the world of all who believe or the world of the elect, or the world of Jews and Gentiles that believe. *God set His affections on the world of believers and gave His Son for the world of believers that everyone of the world of believers when he believes should not perish but have eternal life.* Limiting “world” fits well with the context, for in John chapter 3, Christ is talking with Nicodemus about the importance of the new birth which comes from God. Nicodemus was a Jew and he thought salvation was limited to the Jews only and he hated the Gentiles. Jews called the Gentiles “dogs,” “pigs” and “the world.” Christ told Nicodemus that salvation was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Salvation is for all in the world who believe in Jesus Christ.

This view does explain how God's agape love which is redemptive could save the world of believers. It also explains the statement, ***“to save the world through him”*** (John 3:17), for the intent of the Father's love was to save an infinite multitude of people through the death of Christ, and all those who believe or believers in Christ should not perish but have eternal life. This view says that Christ died for a multitude of people that no man can number to secure their salvation, but He did not die for all men, for some men perish in their sins because they have no Savior.

“But he continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.” (John 8:23-24)

The proponents of this view would say that John 3:16 means, *“God so loved the world of believers that He gave His only begotten Son that believers (everyone believing) might not perish but have eternal life.”*

There are some objections to this viewpoint, but none that are totally untenable.

1. This view forces the meaning of “world,” for in John 3:19 the word “world” obviously refers to the world in general. The light that has come into the world of mankind is Jesus Christ. However, the answer to this objection is that it is not uncommon to have several meanings of the word “world” in one context, such as in John 1:10 (earth, universe, mankind).
2. This view may hinder a person in making a proper offer of the gospel to all men indiscriminately. The answer to this objection is that the Bible, no matter what it says about love, makes a universal gospel offer to all men. There is a mystery and we should leave it there.

CONCLUSION

We can be absolutely sure that God loves all and every sinner who turns to Jesus Christ.

“But God demonstrates (proves) his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)

Whether God has a general love for all men is up for debate, but God’s particular, special and redemptive love is for any man who receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Apart from Christ there is no redemptive love. I can look every man square in the eye and tell him that God loves sinners in Christ, and if he will trust Christ as a poor sinner he will be saved and know that God loves him and Christ died for him. I can say to every man, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you life in Christ.” God will not turn His love away from any person who truly turns to Christ in genuine repentance. God delights in shedding His love upon all who trust the Savior and He never delights in the eternal death of any sinner.

You say, “Does God love me?” He loves you if you are in Christ. He loves you with an infinite love if you have received His Son. If you are not sure of God’s love for you, you can dispel this doubt forever by receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Trust Christ so you can sing the song of the found sheep which goes like this:

“I was a wandering sheep; I did not love the fold;

I did not love my Shepherd’s voice, I would not be controlled:

I was a wayward child, I did not love my home,

I did not love my Father’s voice, I loved afar to roam.

The Shepherd sought His sheep; the Father sought His child;

They followed men o’er vale and hill, O’er deserts waste and wild:

They found me nigh to death, Famished, and faint, and lone;

They bound me with the bands of love, They saved the wandering one.

Jesus my Shepherd is, ‘Twas He that loved my soul;

‘Twas He that washed me in His blood, ‘Twas He that made me whole;

‘Twas He that sought the lost, That found the wandering sheep;

‘Twas He that brought me to the fold, ‘Tis He that still doth keep.

I was a wandering sheep, I would not be controlled;

But now I love my Savior’s voice, I love, I love the fold.

I was a wayward child, I once preferred to roam;

But now I love my Father’s voice – I love, I love His home.”

Horatius Bonar