

March 05, 2023

MORE THAN A BUMPER STICKER.

John 3:1-17

As a youngster attending Sunday school, I recall that every Sunday, we were given a “memory verse” – that is a verse from the Bible that we were required to memorize and recite the following Sunday. I am sure that if you were to ask anyone who was a student of our Sunday school, or any similar Sunday school, what was the first verse they were required to memorize, they would likely tell you John 3:16. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

It used to be, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it still is the case, that if there was only one verse from the Bible that a person could accurately recite, it would most likely be John 3:16. That’s not surprising, since it has been established that John 3:16 has been translated into more languages than any other piece of literature. Over the years, the popularity of that verse has been evident by its appearance on billboards, posters, t-shirts, bumper stickers, mugs and such things.

For many, John 3:16 is a very familiar verse, and that familiarity may have led some to become careless in their understanding of its message. Too often it has taken on the simplicity of a sales pitch, a get-out-of-hell card, or an insurance policy that we keep tucked away for when it is needed. It is often viewed as a decision we make, the consequences of which are primarily personal. But is that the real message that this powerful assurance from Christ is meant to convey?

There is no question that John 3:16 is indeed comforting, but while it is comforting, it is even more challenging; for it is more of a call to action than just an offer of personal comfort.

That call to action is evident in the first few words of John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world.”* We can read that little word “so” as an indication of the extent of God’s love – meaning that it is generous and limitless - and yes, it certainly is, and that’s comforting to know. But the word “so”, speaks not just to the extent of God’s love, it speaks even more of the nature of that love – meaning that it is sacrificial and self-giving.

The love that God shows to us in Christ was extended without us asking. That's the nature of love. And Jesus's commitment to the well-being and salvation of humanity was not limited to what was easy and comfortable for him; he poured his all into it – a fact of which Good Friday bears evidence.

Does that not challenge us? Should that not inform our response to that love? If the love of God is in us, then we have to reckon with the fact that that love, by its very nature, will inevitably draw us into situations that are uncomfortable, difficult and painful, as it did with Jesus. What do we do then? Do we turn away from those situations?

Can we bear testimony to the love of God in us if we refuse to give of ourselves so that others will not perish under the loads that they carry?

The love that God offers to us does not end with our personal well-being and comfort, it extends through us to others.

I read where someone in an attempt to personalize that verse, was encouraging persons to substitute “me” and “I” for “the world” and “everyone”. So instead of “God so loved **the world** that he gave his only son, that **everyone** who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”, it would read: For God so loved *me* that God gave his only Son, so that if *I* believe in him, *I* will not perish but will have eternal life.

That may sound quite comforting and assuring, but I am not sure that it accurately reflects the love of God. There is no place for individualistic pursuits in love. Love does not operate in isolation from others. Love brings us together and connects us at the very core of our being.

God loves the world, which means that no individual, no group, no race, no nationality, and no faith, can lay exclusive or special claim to God's love. When it comes to the love that we have received from God and are required to share, no one is privileged and no one and nothing is left out.

God's love does not discriminate, and for that reason, it challenges us. It rebukes our readiness to embrace some and reject others. It exposes and opposes our unequal treatment of people and our destruction of creation - the very things that inevitably lead to perishing.

Love enables us to recognize our connectedness, not only when it is convenient to do so, but also when it is challenging and even dangerous.

If God loves the world, and we have the love of God in us, can we do otherwise but love the world also?

The consequence of God loving the world as God does, and of us practising that love as shown to us in Jesus, is that the world and all that is good will be preserved.

Let's face it, the world is on a path of perishing, and that is not being alarmist. For when bigotry and intolerance form a part of our response to others; when people and nations choose violence or the threat of violence as the preferred way to settle disputes; when selfishness and greed drive our decisions and actions; when we continue to pollute and degrade the environment; are we not on a path of destruction? Do we not witness the evidence of our perishing all around us?

This is not about God punishing us, it's about us continuing down that path of destruction – personal and societal.

But God loves us, and God is not prepared to stand back and watch us self-destruct, instead God offers us a different path, a better and more hopeful way of living.

"For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

To believe in Jesus is to choose the way of life that Jesus offers. It is to believe in the things that Jesus stood for and to reflect in our lives the things that Jesus represents. It is to choose the path of love – which is the path of eternal life; for love never ends.

So in as much as we may love John 3:16, it's more than just a feel-good message that can be expressed on a bumper sticker; it's a call to action. The love of God must be expressed in our hearts, in our decision-making, in our actions, in our relating – in all of our living. That is what places us on the path to an imperishable life – a life which does not end with death.

What is your response to that call to action?
Are you ready to say yes to that love?

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