

**Sermon: The Next Verse John 3:1-17 March 8, 2020 Lent 2**  
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After getting all of Pope Francis's luggage loaded into the car at the airport, the papal driver noticed the Pope is still standing on the curb.

'Excuse me, Your Holiness,' says the driver, 'Would you please take your seat so we can leave?'

'Well, to tell you the truth,' says the Pope, 'they never let me drive at the Vatican, and I'd really like to drive today.'

Reluctantly, the driver gets in the back as the Pope climbs in behind the wheel. The driver quickly regrets his decision when, after exiting the airport, the Pontiff picks up speed. Enjoying the open roads beyond the confines of the Vatican, Francis is now speeding quite a bit.

Soon they hear a siren and there is a flashing light in the rear view mirror.

The Pontiff pulls over and rolls down the window as the police officer approaches; but the officer takes one look at the driver, and at the passenger in the back seat, turns, goes back to his car, and gets on the radio.

'I need to talk to the Sergeant,' he says to the dispatcher.

He tells his supervisor that he stopped a speeding car but is reluctant to give a ticket because: "The driver is really important He's really important,"

The sergeant asked 'Who do you have there, the mayor?'

Officer: 'Bigger.'

Sergeant: 'The Premier?'

Officer: 'No Bigger Much bigger.'

Sergeant t: 'The PM?'

Officer: 'No. Bigger than the PM'

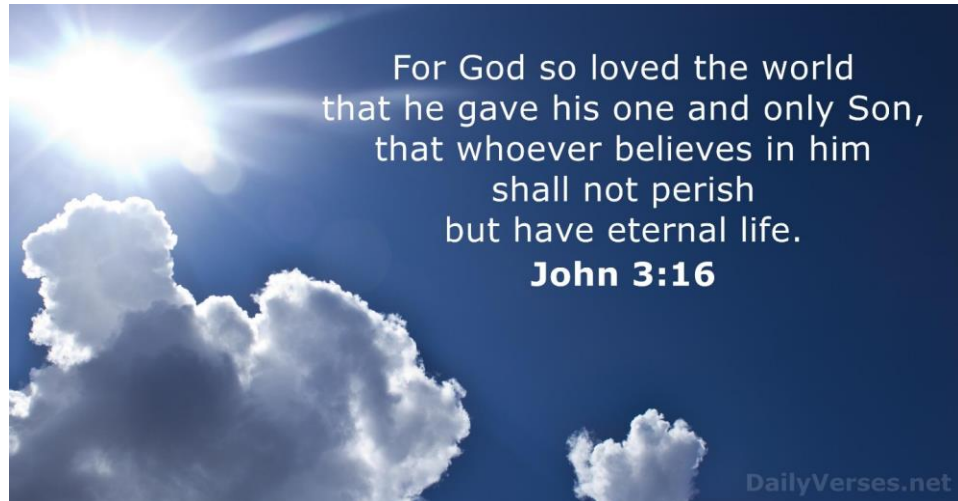
'Well, who is it then?'

And the police man says: "Well, I am not sure... but the Pope is his driver."



If you are of a certain age you may recognize this gentleman. For more than a decade starting in the late 1970s, Rollen Stewart or "Rainbow Man" was the world's most celebrated sports fan, a wig-wearing, sign wielding fanatic who showed up at virtually every major athletic event in the US and always managed to find a seat right in front of a television camera. He hated sports, but he drove about 60,000 miles a year in order to get in on TV with a sign that read simply John 3:16. He was desperate to get people to look at this one Bible verse: John 3:16

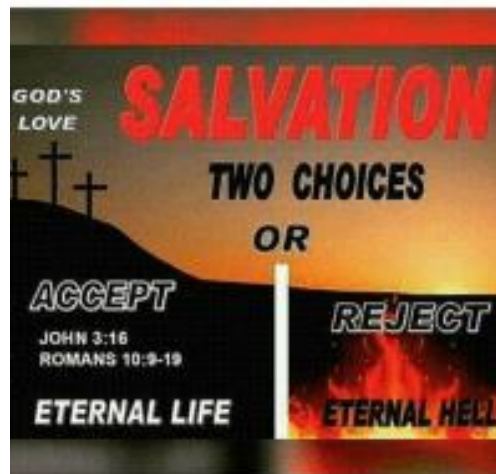
A part of the gospel we read today, John 3:16 may one of the most celebrated verses in the New Testament. Perhaps you memorized this verse as a young person as I did.



The Protestant reformer Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.” Biblical Commentator William Barclay wrote that it is “the very essence of the Gospel.” Author Max Lucado describe ‘John 3:16 as the “hope diamond of the Bible. “It has been called: “the promise that bears hope for the hopeless.”; “The greatest sentence ever written.”; the Gospel in a nutshell.”; “The Mount Everest of Scripture.”

John 3:16 expresses in a few words the depth of God’s profound love for us and the depths to which God would go to convey that love.

In the version I memorized as a child at Vacation Bible School, in the King James Version it reads: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”



John 3:16 is perhaps the most well-known single Bible verse, #1 out of more than 30,000 verses and yet John 3:16 is also one of the most weaponized verses in the Bible. Just try a Google

image search of the verse and you will find images of hell fire and lists of people who will not be getting eternal life. John 3:16 has been invoked as an assertion of exclusion rather than as an affirmation of God's boundless love. John 3:16 has been a verse used to condemn people to hell rather than to voice God's extravagant grace.

"For God so loved that whosoever believeth..."

So what if you do not believe, or maybe you don't believe the right things. Or maybe you don't express belief with the right language. Or maybe you didn't come to your belief in the right way, or maybe you practice your beliefs with the wrong people...well then there is no eternal life for you.

John 3:16 has been used to exclude; it has been in some times and places an expression of judgment rather than grace.

So we have to go bigger.

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In the summer, I shared a series of sermons on misunderstood Scripture verses. And in that context I shared the story of Robert Estienne

Estienne was a French scholar and printer who lived in Paris in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He was a Protestant who was so highly regarded as a scholar and craftsman that the Catholic king of France made him the royal printer over the objections of the dominant church. In 1568 he printed a French translation of the New Testament. And he included a new innovation. He broke the text down into numbered verses. Christian Scripture was broken down into Chapters only in the 1300s. It was subdivided into verses in the mid-1500s.

And in doing his work, Estienne did not take care to consider the verse marking carefully. He did this work while riding on horseback, travelling from Paris to Lyon. He was a great scholar but he did this work on the go.



When we open our Bibles we will see a text divided into chapter and verse. But this is a recent innovation; for most of Christian history the text flowed on undivided.

In 1551, Estienne added verse numbers to the chapter divisions inserted in Scripture in the 13th century. This made navigating the text much easier, of course, but it caused a problem, too.

The numbering of individual sentences (or even phrases, sometimes), tempts the reader to take the text as a collection of discrete statements having meaning and application on their own, in isolation from the larger work, apart from the greater narrative. So when we read scripture we should be cautious in reading a single verse alone, even when the verse is John 3:16



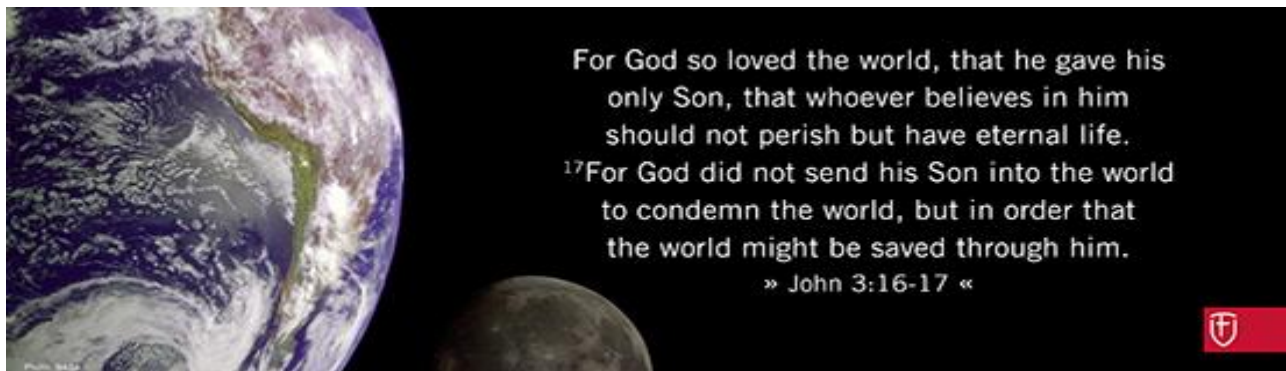
So see verse 17, the verse that comes just after “the world’s most famous Bible verse.” Reading just one more verse offers a larger context and elaborates on the “motive” for God’s sending the Son.

In verse 17, we hear the clear explanation, affirmation, and repetition that the Son was not sent to condemn but to save. So it’s not about who’s in and who’s out, but rather it’s about God’s

consistent intent to love, save, and bless the *whole* world. John 3:17 makes John 3:16 bigger again.

It may be helpful to be reminded that the word the Gospel uses for “world” – *kosmos* – in the rest of John’s Gospel , speaks of something that is hostile to God (e.g. John 15:18-25; 16:8-10, 20, 33; and 17:9-16).

Which means that we might actually translate verses 16 and 17 like this: “For God so loved the *God-hating world*, that he gave his only Son...” and “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn *even this world that despises God*/ but instead so that *the world that rejects God* /might still be saved through him.” God loves and works to save the world even if it rejects God. Verse 17 makes John 16 even bigger – God’s love is just crazy big.



God loves the world. That’s the whole world. And even in John’s day the world was pretty big and diverse— the world included Roman soldiers, tax collectors and prostitutes, pagans, Pharisees, Samaritans , people who went to the temple regularly and those who weren’t allowed in the temple, lepers and other “unclean” people...

Today our world is even bigger. And even more diverse.

And God loves the world. The whole world. Even when the world doesn’t love God, God loves the world.

So much does God love that God gave everything. Not to condemn. But to save.

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The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer echo John 3, verse 16 and 17: “God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are; not an ideal world, but the real world. What we find repulsive in their opposition to God, what we shrink back from with pain and hostility, namely, real human beings, the real world, this is for God the ground of unfathomable love.”

And so, with God, we may Love the world. It’s God’s beloved world. Every bit of it.