



Keynote Passage:

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.—John 3:16-17

This week we ponder the height, depth, width and breadth of God's love. We will consider, within the limitations of our minds and hearts, the immensity, the power and the supremacy of his love. We will ask God to fill us with more of his love.

It's been said that love is the most powerful force in the universe because it alone can conquer the human heart. But God's love does not coerce. *God's love works in our lives by our consent.*

Many people suffer with a warped and twisted view of God's love. They have a perverted idea of God's love because of religious deception, because of a distorted idea of God they have been given by someone who taught them, often in the name of God. They completely misunderstand **The Real Love Story**.

They believe that God loves them in an authoritarian way. They believe that God loves them by demanding and

intimidating them to obey him. They believe that God insists that we do what he wants, and beyond that, that he predestines everyone to behave in a particular way, without freedom of choice on our part.

Sadly, they see God as an abused person may see their spouse, their parent, their teacher or their pastor. They perceive God as yelling at and threatening them, for their own good. They think that he must yell at them and threaten them because he loves them. People come to believe that God is angry and upset with them, and that he wants them to accept his love by enduring horrible suffering. People actually come to believe, as a result of religious propaganda, that they need to be in pain. They have been convinced that they need to hurt, and because he loves them, God makes sure that they suffer.

Thus, many believe that God wants them to live lives of misery. They are convicted that it's God's will that they endure virtual slavery to a church or a denomination, a life of endless duties, rituals, rules and requirements because that is the way they have been taught that God will know if they love him.

It is in this way that the god of religion is far more associated with the word "law" than he is with "love."

In some religious contexts love is made fun of, it is considered a wimpy, weak word, a concept that should not be associated with obeying God.

For people who are trapped in religious legalism, their god is all about control. They perceive their god as controlling all aspects of their lives, everything that they might anticipate doing or not doing is legislated by their religion and taught to them as God's will. God, in short, is all about controlling them, he's an overlord, and he does it because he loves them, or so they are told.

For so many hundreds of millions of people, the god of religion never cracks a smile. For them, the god of religion doesn't experience joy of any kind, and of course, neither should they. They visualize the god of religion as forever leaning forward, on his heavenly throne, casting his eyes earthward, carefully watching and waiting, making notes on his laptop, recording our every false move, our every mistake—so that when the time comes, he will be armed

with all of the sins we have ever committed, ready to pounce on us. As far as many are concerned, their god will be seeking vengeance, there will be hell to pay on the judgment day.

For many people the god of religion operates somewhat like the old company store that Tennessee Ernie Ford once sang about in his song, "Sixteen Tons."

Some 150 to 200 years ago, life for many North American families amounted to little more than slavery. Before the passage of child labor laws, entire families were hired by farms, factories, coal mines, or steel and textile mills. Work days started at dawn, and lasted until sunset. Work weeks lasted for 65-70 hours.

These families didn't have money, credit, debit cards, or ATMs. They often arrived at their place of employment with no money, and essentially sold their souls to the company. The employer usually operated a company store, which ostensibly was for the benefit of the employees, but it was actually for the benefit of the employer or owner.

The farm, factory, coal mine, steel or textile mill was usually located far from any town—it was a town unto itself. Normally, such working class families had no means of transportation, so their needs, in terms of clothing and food, were provided at the company store.

The company store sold essentials—meat, flour, sugar, potatoes, eggs, vegetables and sometimes fruit, if it was in season. Clothing was also sold, especially work clothing.

As soon as the workers were hired, they could make purchases at the store, on credit. They had no cash, so the owner/employer set up a book for each worker, a book in which their credits (earned in wages) and their debits (purchases they bought at the company store) were recorded. No money ever changed hands.

If a worker needed services that the store didn't offer, if they had to hire a preacher for a wedding or a funeral, if parents collectively hired a teacher for their children (in those rare cases when the children weren't working), if they needed the services of a doctor, then employees would simply sign a note of debt to the store and the store would pay the preacher, teacher or the doctor.

If you think it's easy to get into debt with a credit card,

if you feel trapped by the economic system we have today, consider how trapped these workers were as the company store controlled their economic reality. The company store had a monopoly on what they could buy and how much it would cost them.

These workers couldn't take time off work to travel to a place where prices were better, because they didn't have any cash, nor did they have any transportation. Even if they somehow acquired cash and transportation, and even if they became aware that they could buy things cheaper elsewhere, they had to carefully consider the costs of taking time off work. The "boss man" didn't like anyone taking time off work, and all the workers needed their job. They couldn't afford to lose their job.

The institution of the company store which Tennessee Ernie Ford sang about is one of the earliest songs I remember hearing on the radio. "Sixteen Tons" was all about working in a coal mine, loading coal. Tennessee Ernie Ford sang,

*You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt
St. Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go
I owe my soul to the company store*

What does the company store have to do with twisted and perverted ideas of God's love?

Christ-less religion often creates an artificial environment, a closed culture, some have called it a "holy" huddle. People are instructed about where they need to buy their clothing and food, what stores to frequent, what stores to avoid, what movies, if any, to watch and what movies to avoid. They are provided "guidelines" and lists of music they may listen to and music they must avoid.

Within Christendom there are Christian music stores, Christian book stores, Christian schools, Christian athletic clubs and teams, Christian social clubs, the list goes on and on and on. It's a closed, artificial environment where the wagons of the wagon train are circled, ready for attack from outsiders.

When people's lives are controlled, their minds shrink and social and academic inbreeding often takes place. Ideas are censored at the perimeter, and the focus is almost always

on the evil “present day” compared to the “good old days.” Outsiders (some within Christendom call those outside their religious cocoon “the world”) are suspect. Those who are virtual religious slaves are warned by leadership and overlords, “Be careful, ‘the world’ may mess with your mind.”

People who find themselves in such a Godless religious outpost are told that God is protecting and sheltering them, keeping them away from bad and evil practices. Meanwhile, back at the ranch (still with the wagon train metaphor) people find that they owe their souls to the religious company store. They find out that their real spiritual relationship is with an institution, a church and a pastor, rather than with God.

They find that they are not free in Christ, they are controlled and their lives are legislated, scheduled and ordered. They have to be at certain places at certain times wearing the right clothing, saying the right things, singing the right songs and saying the right prayers. They are told that they are being protected. In reality they are being brainwashed—because, they are told, God loves them.

But, *God’s love is given to us upon our consent.* God’s love does not domineer or force. God does not control you. You have a choice. You may accept the love that God offers, or you may reject it. God will never hijack you, he will never kidnap you and keep you captive because he “loves” you. That is not a description of the love of God—it is a description of legalistic religion. God’s love is not abusive, that’s a twisted, perverted relationship that some define as “love.”

Our keynote passage is the real love story of God. John 3:16 is one of, if not the most, well-known and most memorized verses in the Bible. Sometimes we just turn to John 3:16 and quote this verse as if it were some kind of magic potion. Sometimes this verse becomes a fuzzy and warm security blanket, which makes us feel good, but we neglect to remember the story behind it.

The context of this chapter gives us an entirely different background.

We begin the third chapter of John with a powerful religious leader, a VIP, a respected and well known religious authority, a man named Nicodemus, coming to Jesus “at night.”

Nicodemus was a prominent religious leader of his day,

a Pharisee who believed that God loved him on the basis of his own religious performance. Pharisees were extremely diligent and careful to obey God's laws (or at least their interpretation of God's laws) down to the most minute and microscopic intent.

It seems that Nicodemus felt the need to see Jesus, but he couldn't take the chance of being seen by others in the company of Jesus. It might ruin his career. It might diminish his standing with others if he was seen in the company of a teacher who lacked the professional, academic standing awarded by the religious authorities of that day.

You see, getting back to Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons"—Nicodemus owed his soul to the company store—the company store of first century Pharisaical Judaism.

So Nicodemus came to Jesus, out of the shadows. Even though Nicodemus is taking a risk being seen with Jesus, he still can't bring himself to ask Jesus a question. He can't be seen anywhere in the religious world other than his own company store. He just says that "we" know that you are a teacher come from God.

He may have meant this sincerely, or there may have been a hint of pretentious arrogance. Nicodemus wanted to see and learn from Jesus, but he didn't want to be seen in his presence, so he came at night, and he couldn't bring himself to demean himself by asking Jesus a question.

Jesus replies to these introductory comments of Nicodemus by saying, in essence, "Okay Nicodemus, let's cut to the chase" (that would be my paraphrase).

Now, from the actual quotation in John 3:3—Jesus says, *no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*

Jesus cut through all the pretense and religious posturing. Again, in my paraphrase of what he said, I can see him saying something like this—

"Let's get to the point. It doesn't matter who you think you are, how great you think you are, what religious traditions you are obeying, how careful you are to obey your religious requirements and regulations, what it comes down to is this: unless you are born again you won't see the kingdom of God. You need to start all over again."

Jesus then continues, in a variety of ways, to explain to Nicodemus what it means to be in relationship with God. In

order to know God we must come to know him on his terms. This is the setting for verse 16 and this famous articulation of God's love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...

The ultimate expression of God's love was him, in the person of Jesus, laying down his life for us, doing for us what we can never do for ourselves. The ultimate expression of God's love was the death of Jesus. That's the real love story. Now we continue in verse 16:

...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Our response to God must be *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*, none of this "faith plus our works" stuff. Our consent to God's love must include total surrender to Jesus, complete trust in the sufficiency of Jesus to take care of our every need. We must dump the notion that our religious credentials, achievements, medals, honors and awards cut any ice with God. Nicodemus had to die to all of that. So do we.

That's the way to start all over again. That's the way to be spiritually transformed, by God's love. God won't force you to be spiritually re-born. You must accept his offer. *You must consent to his love.* Apart from our consent, there is no action that we can take that will spiritually transform and re-birth us.

Even after we decide to accept God's offer, we still can't attain the kingdom of God with our own efforts. We cannot spiritually re-birth ourselves. No amount of hard work, no amount of obedience, no amount of effort on our part will result in our spiritual re-birth.

Our spiritual re-birth is by God's grace. *Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.* Looking to a verse or two beyond our keynote passage in verses 16 and 17, Jesus says, in verse 19:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Again, permit me to paraphrase Jesus—“Nicodemus—you have a twisted and perverted idea of God’s love. You’ve sold your soul to the company store, in your case, to the Pharisees. You believe, to the very core of your being, that you do all that is necessary to earn God’s love. I’m telling you that you are living in darkness. I’m telling you that all of your deeds that you think are so righteous and virtuous are actually evil. They are evil because you think that by them you are earning God’s love. You’re going to have to start all over again. You’re going to have to be spiritually re-born.”

That’s **The Real Love Story**—a story of our rescue from the slavery and oppression of the religious company store.

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