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JOHN 3:16-21

John Series: Get a Life in Jesus

[PRAYER] Lord, we're praying for each one of us that we would receive something from you today from your word. We thank you for the power that it has to cleanse us, to convict us, to guide us, to encourage us. Lord, you know what each person needs today. So we're asking your Holy Spirit to speak today, illumine your word as we look at it. Give us a depth of knowledge of who you are and what that means for us personally. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well today our passage is John 3:16 and following. But I don't want to start there. The verses I want you to read are about the love of God because remember in John 3:16 the first words are – *For God so loved*. We'll come back to that in a moment, but I really want to rest on the love of God today. I want you to understand what it is, what it looks like personally for your own heart and life.

To do that, I want to zero in on a couple of other passages of scripture. So would you stand with me as I read some verses from God's word? These are words that take off on the love of God and apply them to our lives. It's going to help us, I think, enrich our understanding of God and who He is and what this love is all about.

So Ephesians 4:32-5:2 reflect on God's love in a personal ways. *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love (and what is our model here?) just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

We're going to see that in John 3 with the application of His love is just really broad and I hope you'll experience that this morning as we look at it. When I looked at 1 John 4:16 I just paused there. I want you to pause with me. It says – *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us*. We know and rely on it. To me that just says stop and just think about that for a moment. How do I rely on the love of God in my life? That's the question I want you to ask today as you're just thinking about your own personal life.

You can go ahead and have a seat.

God's love is the foundation of the verse we're going to look at in our passage in John 3. So let's look at John 3:16. This is a verse that's probably the most often quoted verse besides the one *judge not lest you be judged* that people often misquote. But this one is used continually. You'll see this verse, John 3:16, held up at baseball games and football games and other sports events. Tim Tebow when he was playing football had John 3:16 on the black under his eyes. It's one of

those verses. And why? Because it really summarizes the gospel. It summarizes really the message that God has for us in our own personal lives.

So let's take it apart and look at some of the words there to grasp an understanding of it. It says – *For God so loved...* The word *so* is an important word there. Because what he's saying is He didn't just love, He *so* loved. It's immense. This is broad. This is something that is all encompassing. That He *so* loved. This love is really big.

As I was pondering the love of God this week in my own life, I was thinking back recently I was at some people's houses and they said you've got to sit in that chair there. It was this overstuffed beanbag chair, but it wasn't made of beans. It had chopped up memory foam inside of this thing. So when I sat in it, I sunk in. And man, that is the most comfortable chair I've experienced. I mean I had support everywhere. My calves were supported. I was laying back and my back was supported, my shoulders were supported, my hamstrings. I was in this "ah this is so comfortable." All of the muscles of my body were supported. If I had any aches or pains I'm sure they were gone in that moment as I experienced this chair.

This week I was thinking about God's love and if we really get a handle on what God's love is, then it starts to support us in all of those places where we have pressure. It supports us in all those places where you have needs or pains. It's just this awesome filling all the gaps. I want you to know today, if you look at your life, as most of us can do, and we see hurt because we live in a broken world, pain that we've experienced in our lives, some different ways than others, some more deep than others. I want you to know that God's love is designed. He designed his love to fill in those gaps, to be this something really special in your life that brings healing.

So when he says *God so loved the world*, that's really big. There's seven billion people on this planet and I'm sure if they all filed through, God would look each one of them in the eye and He would say, "I love you." That's what we're talking about here. He just loves every person.

I saw a quote this week from Max Lucado, a really great author. It says this: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your picture would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He'll always listen. He could live anywhere in the universe and He chose your heart. What about that Christmas gift He sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, my friend. He's crazy about you." I thought that was a great statement about God's love for us. It's a really big concept that we must understand.

We're going to dive into it a little bit more, but let's take a few more of these words here. When he says He loves the world, the word *world* is used three different ways in the Bible. One of the ways the word *world* is used is about creation when the scriptures say that *God made the world and everything in it*. He's talking about the flowers and the trees and the birds and the night and the day and the stars and the sun. He made all of the world. Creation. That's one of the ways the word *world* is used in the Bible. That's not how it's used here.

A second way that the word *world* is used is in 1 John 2:15 where it says – *Love not the world*. It seems like a contrast here. God so loved the world. It tells us don't love the world because the

word *world* there has to do with the world system. There is an agenda today in our culture. It's kind of a movement of the culture and of the world system that's going in a direction. We are counter-culture in that respect. So he's warning us, John, the same writer that writes John 3 is the one of wrote 1 John 2:15 where he says *don't love the world and the things of the world*. The reason he's saying that is because if you get yourself attached to the world and its system then you can be led astray in a way that messes with you and you can get yourself in trouble in so many different ways. So young people, I would encourage you to dedicate yourself to understanding what is this way of God, this being a Christ follower that God would have for us and how is it different than the world system. That's the second way that *world* is used. That's not how it's used here.

The third way it's used and the way it's used here is all the people in the world. So he's referring to the people here. That God loves all of them. He's making a statement here about He loved the people of the world so much that He did something about it. You can tell the greatness of a person's love, one, by their sacrifice, and I would say secondly, how much they don't deserve it. So if you go out of your way to listen to someone who doesn't deserve it and it's really sacrificial, that can be a real form of love.

So in John's picture that he's drawing for us to help us understand this story of salvation and what it looks like, he says – *God so loved the world that he gave*. And what did He do? He *gave his one and only Son*. The King James Version says *only begotten Son*. You might say, "Well I don't understand why it says only begotten because I'm a son of God. You're a daughter of God. God doesn't just have one kid. He has lots of us as children." But the reality is this passage helps us understand that God only has one begotten Son, only one Son that comes from Him. The rest of us, how do we get into the family? We're adopted. We're adopted into God's family, Ephesians tells us. So he's describing this passion that God has by giving His only Son.

Now the subject of the first line that you see is God, *God loved*. The second line is another phrase, tied into the verse, but now the subject changes to us, *whoever*. That's every one of us. You can put your name in there if you want. *That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*.

Now this is where the love of God gets a little bit tricky. Because everybody would say God is love. The Bible says God is love. People often say "for the love of God." They're not even Christians and they say that. So there's a sense where everybody knows that God is love. That's not the question.

The question though is how do you deal with a God of love when you've got these other qualities, like His sovereignty or His justice or His holiness or the wrath of God? That would be a great verse, it seems to me, if we didn't have the word *perish* in there. It just seems to draw attention to something different. So it's very important for us to understand that this love we don't take by itself.

I would suggest that in our culture today when people think of God and they think of the love of God, they misunderstand God. It's more like the sentimental kind of love, this warm, fuzzy kind of love you put in your pocket or wear around your neck that has to do with God's love. But

that's not what's being said here. If you understand the perish idea then the love becomes more significant and deep.

See, the reality is that God's love is demonstrated because we're sinners. And the fact that we live in a world where we're sinners and we have this problem that we can't have a relationship with God, then we are condemned. That's essentially what's happened. We're all condemned. We're on a path. We're going the wrong way. So we don't live in a neutral world where you're either going to choose God or you're going to choose to not be with God. The reality is if you're not choosing God, you're already on a path. It's a negative path. It's a bad one. It's a destructive path. It's a path to perishing if we use the word that's described there. So what God does is He loved us so much He wants relationship with us. He paid this ransom of His Son so that we could have this personal relationship.

So we have to ask the question, who did He pay the ransom to? Did He pay the ransom to Satan? No, He didn't do that. You know who He paid the ransom to? He paid the ransom to Himself. Because of God's holiness, as we saw in our previous study about Jesus coming in and cleansing the temple, that white hot holiness coming in contact with a misuse of God's temple, when we saw that picture, we see the holiness of God. And God because He's holy can't have a personal relationship with a person who's not holy. It just doesn't work. And because of that, He loves us so much, He wants that relationship, He offers us this salvation that comes through Jesus Christ.

So when we believe in Him, then we aren't on this path to perishing anymore. Now we have this eternal life. The story of the gospel of John is all about how to have this life. Not just in the future, I would suggest, but even now.

So we're going to take this idea and develop it a little bit more. In fact that's what John does. So let's go on to the next verse where he says – *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

What is going on here in this bringing together? I want to take you to the last verse of the same chapter. So if you have your Bible with you, you can look at the last verse of this chapter. Verse 36 tells us what's going on here. As he's continuing to amplify the story, he says – *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.* That's what we just looked at above there in John 3:16. *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.*

The idea is the people who don't accept Christ have the wrath of God. We have to understand the wrath of God. Because if you don't, then the love of God doesn't make a lot of sense. It's just sentimental. The reality is that God loves us so much He offers us this way to have a personal relationship with Him. If you don't accept that, you don't take that on, then you continue to live in this condemning environment as we see in verse 17, that's the word being used. The word *condemn*.

If we go into verse 18, it continues the same idea when it says this: *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

So we just have to understand that we don't live in this neutral environment. This is what a lot of people believe. Oh there's a lot of ways to get to heaven. I don't know if I'm going to choose God or not choose God. But there's a lot of philosophies out there as if somehow we're in the center of the universe picking off of a buffet platter what we're going to take into the spiritual realm.

I just want you to know, that's not what the Bible teaches. What the Bible teaches is that everyone is born with this sin nature. You're not born as a blank slate. You're born with a sin nature that you inherit from humanity. And when you're born you have this sin nature and you're progressing in a selfish manner. That doesn't mean you can't do good things. We do all kinds of good things. But there's this movement in our lives that's condemned. We're going in the wrong direction. That's why it's so urgent for us to make this decision to accept Jesus Christ, to believe in Him. Those are the words. I'm saying accept Jesus Christ because those are the words I like to use, but he's saying to believe in Him. To believe in Jesus.

What does that believe mean? He's going to describe this belief and help us understand what belief is. I think John's going to define belief in the next verses. So let me take you to them starting in verse 19. His is belief defined, according to John, as he's trying to articulate what it means and how important it is for you to make a decision in your life. You've got to choose to believe Him.

So verse 19 says this: *This is the verdict*. Now the terminology is courtroom language because it's a judicial statement. You're condemned. You're moving in the wrong direction. There's this wrath of God that's present. It's actually scary to think about. *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world*. When he says *light* he's talking about the gospel message here. The gospel message of God, His kingdom, and the opportunity we have to receive Christ into our lives. That's the gospel message.

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

This is why people don't come to Christ. Is because they like their life the way it is. They like to do the things they're doing. You know if you came to Christ you'd have to change. You just got to know, that's what will happen in you. You will change. You will live differently. Things will be different. So when this light comes in, this gospel message comes in, it draws attention to the darkness and says you got to make a choice. There's a lot of people who end up saying, "I don't want to go in that direction. I want to live my own life." *Because their deeds were evil.*

Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Yesterday I was teaching a parenting seminar in California. At the end I asked people in the group, "Could some of us share what you've learned today?" And one gentleman said, "I have learned that I have no idea about what you're talking about. Before I teach this to my kids, I've

got to learn this myself. I really got to make some changes in my own heart because I can't pass this onto my kids, I can't help them understand this concept that you're trying to teach us. I have got a lot of work to do in myself."

So I said, "Let me show you the verse I'm going to share with my folks tomorrow." So I read to him this verse. And this really identified, this last verse here, verse 21. *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

You've just got to understand that there's something that happens when you become a Christian that you don't have to blame people anymore. You don't have to defend yourself. You don't have to do the self-condemnation thing in your life anymore. You just come before God and say, "God, I know I'm a sinner."

I was talking to Liz, one of the gals. She's not here today, but she comes here sometimes. I was talking to her this week about what I was teaching this Sunday (today) and I said one of the things we're going to deal with is condemnation and fear. Condemnation and fear. And she says, "Oh. That's really important. I've been to a lot of positive affirmation groups..." So I started thinking about what she's saying and it reminded me about is that there's a worldly way to deal with condemnation, self-condemnation or condemnation of others, or the fear that you're going to be exposed. And that's by having positive affirmations, like I'm the hero in my world and I can take charge and I can share the course of my own history. You know. You hear it all the time. This is the positive affirmation. If you're struggling with self-doubt or inferiority, then the world's solution is to say well let's bolster you up by making you feel like a hero. Let me make you feel good about who you are. Look at all the good things about you.

There's nothing wrong with that, except that's not exactly how God works with us. You know when you become a Christian, you know what you say? You don't say, "I'm this hero." You say, "I'm a sinner. And Jesus is my hero. I want Him to come into my life and I want Him to run my life. And now I'm not trying to build myself up." Because the reality is when you go to bed at night and you've tried to pump yourself up all day and you go, "Oh man," and you realize I just don't have what it takes. See, salvation does something really different inside of your life that helps you rely on something outside of you instead of something inside. If you're only relying on what's inside, you're going to be disappointed. You're going to disappoint yourself, you're going to have regrets, you're going to have all kinds of problems, including self-condemnation in your life. It will create a problem for you.

On Wednesday evenings we have a small group that I attend that's kind of the think tank for Sunday morning. So we were talking about self-condemnation, just because the word condemned is used here. As we talked about self-condemnation, Dianne had a good point. She said, "Self-condemnation is a dead end." I was trying to ask the question, what's the difference between self-condemnation and Holy Spirit conviction? Because the Holy Spirit conviction is different than this self-condemnation. And she had a good point. Self-condemnation is a dead end. You don't go anywhere. But when the Holy Spirit convicts you, He's pointing you in a direction. Yeah, you have a problem, but here's the solution. Here's where you're going. Here's what you

need to do differently. It's a growth experience, where self-condemnation is just shame. And that shame is a damaging thing.

See, Christ died on the cross to deal with all of that. So now we don't have to be condemned. We don't have to live with the fear that we're going to be exposed so people are going to see who we really are. When we start asking people, "What is your deepest fear?" most people wouldn't really share. But if you really think about really what your deepest fear is, often it comes to this that I don't feel like I would be accepted if people really knew who I really was or people would condemn me if they knew who I really was. See, when we're in this relationship with Jesus Christ, it's just this love. It's this *God so loved the world that he gave* us something. And through His Son we have this salvation, we can believe in Him.

So John's definition here of belief is this coming into the light and then trusting. Trusting that God is going to fill all those holes. That God is going to take away that sin. It's having this new life and recognizing that this new life is freedom from this condemnation that takes place.

Now as I ponder this idea of the love of God, I was drawn to several different passages of scripture. So I want you to walk with me here into some other passages. I'll put them up on the screen for you. I know it's a lot of scripture, but I'm hoping that you'll see that understanding the love of God isn't just about salvation. That's what it's talking about here, and this is the emphasis. When you get saved, it's because of the love of God that takes you from the wrath and the condemnation and the fear of being exposed into the light and into this belief of Jesus Christ, this new relationship. But the love of God doesn't stop with salvation. That's why I want you to see how valuable this love of God is for you on a daily basis in your own life.

I think when we understand the love of God, it affects our relationship with other people and it's easier then to love other people when we understand God's love for us, and it's easier for us to deal with the inner challenges we have that make it hard for us just to live life. The inner thoughts, the negative thoughts, the self-condemning thoughts that we have don't have to be there because of the love of God. If we understood the love of God more, then I think we would be able to deal with this.

So I want to expand this idea of the love of God with you and I want to show you some scriptures that help us understand that it's bigger than just salvation. That's your entry point. You want to get saved and by understanding God's love for you and how He wants to rescue you from yourself and from that sin nature and He wants to free you from salvation. So that's the starting point. But then it starts to impact all these other places inside of your heart, inside of your life.

I was drawn to Ephesians 4, as we read earlier. Why? Notice because it affects our relationship with others. If we start at the end of the verses there, it says – *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*. So if you start with that *walk in the way of love...* So Christ offered this sacrifice, we walk in the way of love, and then where do we get to? Well we start forgiving other people. We're compassionate with them.

I think that if we really understand God's love fully, I'm not sure we can understand it fully, but the more of it we get, the more we grasp this idea of His love, the easier it is for us to love those difficult people around us, those people that are hard to love, those people that have hurt us in the past, whoever it might be. Because we're getting this picture of God so loved the world. How big this love is that impacts us on this really deep level. And then we can just rely on this love. That's what 1 John 4:16 says. *Rely on the love that God has for us.*

As we talked and I thought about this idea of self-condemnation this week, I just realized that we do a lot of that I think.

A sixteen year old daughter, getting ready to go to bed, turns the light off in the bathroom, and as she looks out the window after she turns the light off, she sees something moving in the backyard. So she goes to the window. Of course it's dark in the bathroom now, so she goes to the window and looking out and there by the garage she can see this figure. Or is it really a figure? It's like the guy's in a trench coat leaning against the garage, I think. So she's looking at it trying to figure that out and then he looks at her. She freezes and panics, gets down low, and moves into her mom and dad's bedroom. Goes in there to where her mom and dad are already sleeping and, "Mom. Mom. Get up. Would you come and look at this? I think there's somebody outside by the garage."

So Mom gets out of bed and now both Mom and daughter are looking out the window. As they're looking out the window mom's trying to see what is that? Yeah. So mom's realizing there's a person out there too. So now the daughter says, "What should we do? Should we call the police or should we wake up Dad?"
"Let's wake up Dad."

"Dad. Dad. Come on. There's somebody out by the garage." So they get Dad and Dad comes out there and now three of them are in the dark bathroom looking out there at this thing. And Dad says, "It's just a weed. It's a weed that's out there."

"No, Dad. Really. He looked at me. I saw him out there."

"Okay." So Dad gets a flashlight.

Daughter says, "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to check it out."

So the daughter says, "Be careful."

So he goes out to the backyard with a flashlight and he shines it on the garage as Mom and daughter are looking, and sure enough it's this big weed that's there.

He comes back in the house, not judgmental, and with a twinkle in his eye he says, "That was a really scary weed," to his daughter. And he goes back to bed. He wasn't upset, just messing with her. He goes back to sleep. His wife goes back to bed. And she goes back to bed, but she can't sleep. "I'm so embarrassed. I got my mother up. I'm so embarrassed. I got my father up. I can't believe I did that? Oh I'm so embarrassed. I got my mother up, I got my father up. I can't believe I did that." And you know how it goes round and round, and you're laying on your bed trying to think of this. "I'm such an idiot."

See, I think we do that to ourselves. I think sometimes we're lying in bed and sometimes it's only for an evening, but there are some people who live with those kind of regrets and beat themselves up with self-condemnation over long periods of time because of maybe a failed marriage, or because of a job situation, or because some financial thing's gone wrong, or because of a child who's done the wrong thing. So I am a bad father, I am a bad husband, I am a bad driver. And so we start doing the self-condemnation thing.

I'm convinced that if we understand the love of God then we won't be doing that. If you're finding yourself in those negative patterns, the solution is to understand the love of God. This love isn't just some sentimental thing. It's really deep. It's this thing that goes around our hearts and heals the places where we're damaged. It's the place where we are forgiven for things we've done wrong. It's the place where regrets are matched with this love that soothes our heart on a deep level.

The passage that we're talking about today in John 3 is not about self-condemnation. It's about condemnation that comes from not accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. So I don't want to confuse self-condemnation there, but I want to take you to another passage because I do believe that God's love is so big that it encompasses even this idea of self-condemnation.

This is the first and last verse of Romans 8. Romans 8:1 says – *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* No condemnation from self. No condemnation from husband, wife. No condemnation from employers, judges. There's no condemnation. So if you're in Jesus Christ, people can say all kinds of things, but it doesn't affect your soul, that part of you that's protected that no one can damage. Your identity in Christ is protected. It's the bigger part of you that's protected by the love of God.

So you get to the last parts of the same passage in Romans 8. *I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from (what?) the love of God.*

Nothing can separate you from the love of God. This love of God has for you in that verse – *For God so loved the world* – is bigger than... It's great for salvation. And that's what we need. It's really big in and of itself, but it's much more than that. It takes us to every area of our lives and gives us what we need in the depth of it. Romans 8 – love, and how powerful love is. It's big.

How big is it? Just one more verse. Bear with me here as I take you on this path through scripture. There's so many verses about love. Here's how big it is because Paul is praying for the Ephesian church and he says – *And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love.* That is, you've got this salvation that comes from the love of God. You're being rooted and established in this love, not just with God, but *may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people.* So this is church experience of love that we so enjoy and there's depth to that. We have all of that. Here's what he's praying. I pray that you'd be able *to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.* It is really big. Why? *So you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

God wants to fill you up. He wants to provide for you. He wants to give you what you need. He wants to help you deal with those negative thoughts that rob you of the joy, the life that He wants for you. I think it's like sitting in that memory foam chair where all the muscles of your body are supported. I just love that picture because in the same way, God wants to support every hurting place that you have. Every negative thought He wants to replace it with His love.

He wants to give you something much deeper, not so that you can excuse yourself. Not so you can start saying, "Oh I can do this wrong thing and it's okay." No. There are times when we come into the light and God says, "You know what you're doing is wrong. You need to change it. I died so that you could live a new life so you wouldn't have to be condemned or self-condemned or whatever it is. You wouldn't have that. I have come so that you would have this new life and have it in abundance." That's what He invites us to do. And I would suggest that God has for us something much bigger than we can imagine.

So when we go back to John 3:16 and it says – *For God so loved the world*, the word *so*, that two-letter word expands this whole idea for us of what God has. Something very big that we all need. Not just for salvation. That's a good starting point. But it's just every day what we need. That God wants to do something deeper in the heart of our souls.

Let's stand and pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I know that there are some people here who feel rejected, inadequate, condemned, hurt, overwhelmed. We know, Lord, that you are a God of love. We want to thank you first for rescuing us from ourselves, from our sin nature, and providing salvation for us. Lord, I ask that you'd provide healing because of your love. That you'd provide hope because of that love. Lord, we ask that you'd provide confidence because of your love. We ask that you'd do a deep work in our hearts. Give us such an understanding of this love that you have that it draws us to love people more, to change the way we think about ourselves, and even to appreciate you more and what you've done for us. Lord, we need you and we need that love. So thank you so much for providing it for us. In Jesus' name, amen.