

If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab them. If you don't have a Bible with you, there should be a hardback black one somewhere around you. At Christmastime we let you go to lost and found and pull any nice leather ones out you want, but on Easter all we have are these hard ones. If I see you again Christmas, you might get yourself a new nice leather Bible, or maybe a journal or something. For this morning all I have for you are the hardback black ones.

I want to be real straight, as straight as I know how to be. We're going to be in probably the most well-known text in the Bible, John 3:16. Even if you don't have much of a background at church, you've seen this verse waved at you if you've ever watched a football game or a basketball game. As they trot on to kick a field goal or the extra point someone will be flashing before your face John 3:16. If you're paying attention when someone is making the free throw shot you will oftentimes see John 3:16 there.

It's a verse that even those who aren't necessarily believers in Christ have at least a frame of reference for the text. So we're going to be in John 3:16. I will read a bit of verse 17, but predominantly we're going to be in verse 16. Before we get in, let me set it up. I have been with my wife Lauren for 15 years now. It's about to be 16 years with her. We've been married for 14 years this summer. This July will be our fourteenth year as a married couple.

Now, with that said, the first seven years were a bit of a nightmare. I already see some wives looking over at their husbands. "I will kill you." My wife knows I'm telling this. We have no fronts. This is just reality. Her background and my background put into the same house together did not work well. We couldn't even figure out why it was going so badly on us. We knew we were fighting all the time. We knew the home was not a safe place for her or a safe place for me.

Really what made it much more difficult is I was awesome at work. People loved me at work. I was like, "Woman, they love me at work. It's not like they're saying these things at work, so somebody is off. There are 20 of them, and there's you. Obviously my boys at work know a bit more." What I realized about the end of year four, moving into year five of marriage... There wasn't like this moment that made me realize it as much as just I kind of had one of those "Oh no" moments.

In the midst of a lot of strife and a lot of conflict and me feeling trapped... Seriously, I was laying in my bed at night going, "Oh my God, this certainly cannot be the rest of my life." In the middle of that, it kind of

struck me I had been disciplined and trained by our predominant culture in what love is. That, for me (not for my marriage, because it was going to take a couple more years for God to work his grace in my marriage), was a massive moment of enlightenment.

I had been trained (I didn't even know I had been trained) by everything around me, from movies to sitcoms to songs, on what love is, and our modern cultural predominant idea of love is a shallow, hollow, ridiculous, empty, impossible-to-feel-safe type of emotive love that looks down on a deep, genuine, biblical love and would view *it* as unhealthy rather than the modern sensibilities, which has shown us to be nothing but unhealthy. Let me unpack that.

Predominantly (I want to say predominantly; that means that's not everyone, but mostly), love is purely emotive and can be fallen into and out of, depending really on how happy the other person is making us. So really, we don't love the other person; we love us. That's what we love. That's not love. Love is, "You make me happy, so I love you." That's you loving you. That's not you loving someone else. Man, I'm in hook, line, and sinker to this. I love Jesus, my wife loves Jesus, we're good people, and yet there is no shalom in the home.

The reason that was is my expectation was that Lauren was going to do whatever I needed her to do to keep me happy, and *her* expectation was that *I* was going to do anything *I* could do to keep *her* happy, and both of us were trying to fix one another. It did not work well for us. So you take this idea of love to mean a simple kind of emotive fluttering of the heart. How could you possibly feel safe in that? See, if what love is is you making me happy, then won't you have to be on your guard to never show me your weaknesses? Because if I see your weaknesses, I'm definitely not going to like those weaknesses.

Even if you watch 20-somethings date, it's like used car salesmen. If you sell used cars, I'm not trying to be offensive. I'm simply saying you're going to point out the strengths, and you're going to not show them that door doesn't open. You're dating and it's all just... You know, you're great. You're such a romantic. You're such a gentleman. Then you get married and "Hey, this door doesn't open." "Oh, I didn't tell you about that? Too bad. You bought it."

Now you have this inability to actually be fully known, and when your weaknesses are seen by your spouse, you'll be forced to justify them. Our most common means of justification is to remind the other person of *their* weaknesses. So now you have someone who's judging you for *your* weaknesses, and in defense of *your* weaknesses you will point out *theirs*. This is a recipe for disaster, and it is how we define love in the modern sensibilities.

Listen to people talk all the time. They fell out of love. "I just don't love him anymore." In fact, the thing that's probably most frowned upon in predominant culture when it comes to love is someone who loves by will, what the Hebrews called *ahava*. It was a love of the will. It was "I'm not going anywhere." Don't romanticize that. That's not rose petals and violin and candles being lit and, "Oh, honey, I'm not going anywhere." All right? That's something on fire over here, a knife flung past your head, you're hunkered down, there's chaos everywhere, and you say, "I'm not going anywhere."

Ahava says, "I've seen the ugly side of you and I'm staying." Yet we would view that in our culture predominantly as unhealthy. "Surely God doesn't want you for that. Your life is so short. Are you really going to spend it like that?" In our culture, love is flippant. It can shift and change at any given moment. It is not sustaining, and it is not safe. If you want to try to get a handle on why people are putting off marriage or not getting married at all, you only need to look at how we're defining love. Why would anyone want that?

Really, this finds its roots in the Romans and their view of love. We've just lapped it up like fools. If love is purely emotive, then what's to stop Cupid in his little diaper from lighting me up when I go to the store after this, and all of a sudden I don't love Lauren anymore; I love this hot woman I saw in aisle six? What could I do? It's Cupid. I just fell out of love with Lauren. I'm now in love with the woman on aisle six buying peanut M&Ms for her family. I mean, you can giggle, but this is the kind of nonsense we are lapping up and loving.

We don't even have language for love anymore. I know, because you love fajitas. You love fajitas, you love your dog, and yet you would still say you love your spouse, and you'd still say you love your parents, or you love your sisters or brothers. We don't even have language that would allow love to be deep for us. We don't even know what we're saying when we say that anymore. Most of the time when we say, "I love you," what we're saying is, "You make me happy. You make *me* glad, so I love you."

This is a weak form of love. It will not sustain moving forward. It will require some *ahava* in order to make it in the long run, in order to be safe, in order to grow as people. See, I didn't love Lauren; I loved me. That's who I loved. I really, really dug me. Lauren was a bit of a problem, because she wasn't making me as happy and as big a deal as I thought I was. That created some conflict. There was reciprocity there. I wasn't the only non-saint in the room at the time. So we'd just grind it out. Then it occurred to me, "Wait a minute; I've been disciplined wrongly, so I need to get back to the Word of God. I need to understand..."

Here's why I'm even saying any of this to you. I'm saying this to us because if we don't understand what love actually is, and if our understanding of love doesn't have some depth and some root and an anchor to it, when we begin to talk about God's love for us, we can't frame it up. It won't feel as spectacular as it is,

because we'll feel as though... We've heard this all weekend in our baptistery testimonies. We've heard that we feel like we have to measure up, and we feel like we have to do everything right in order for God to love us.

Where did we get that idea? We got that idea from the Romans, and we breathe it in every time we watch television and the movies and listen to songs on the radio. It is the air of a love that is not unconditional, but rather is very much conditional, that we are loved as long as we can perform accordingly. That's not love as the Bible teaches it. So it's important for us to move away from this popular, predominant understanding of love and get into the biblical version of love.

Yes, I want emotions... I want my chest to flutter when Lauren walks in the room, and it still happens by the grace of God. I not only love that woman, I like her. But there have been many days that it's *ahava*. Listen. After you have your brain cut on and you have to go through chemo for 18 months, nothing about that is sexy. Nothing about you lying on the floor, trying to crawl your way to the toilet to vomit makes your wife go, "I'm glad I married this one." Do you know what you need in that moment? You need *ahava* in that moment.

On that day where you're exhausted and just being the worst parts of you, what you need is *ahava*. You need someone who goes, "Yeah, I've seen that. It's ugly, but I love you. I'm not going anywhere." So with me setting up love that way, let's look at this very popular verse, John 3:16. In fact, many of you probably won't even need to look at it. I'll read ESV, and then I'll even go some King James for some of you who might have memorized this text in the King James.

"For God so loved the world..." If you write in your Bible, circle things in your Bible, or highlight things in your Bible, I would encourage you to underline, highlight, or circle the word *so*. It's a great word. "For God *so* loved the world," as in there was a volume of love God had for the world that he's expressing in this text. It wasn't a little bit of love. He *so* loved the world. What he means by *world* here is not that he loved the planet Earth, but rather that he loved the inhabitants of the planet Earth. **"For God so loved the world..."**

Now I want to stop, and I want us to chat about this. The next part of this text... It says, **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."** Now what you have here is the love of God initiating towards us. Again, this whole thing is spectacular. For God *so* loved the world, that he moved *towards* those on earth. He moved *towards* us. Here's why this is important.

I'm not a fool in certain areas. (In certain areas I'm very much a fool.) I am well aware that out before me now are people who are struggling in one area of life or another. There are addictions in this place. There are fears in this place. There are people struggling with depression in this place. There are those of you

with marriages... You got the kids dressed. It stressed you out, but you got them all in their cool new gear. Somebody probably got screamed at, but you got them there.

You got here just in time. You argued as you pulled into the parking lot. "I told you we should have left a little bit earlier!" Then you walked into this place, barely friends at all, wondering how much longer you can do it, and somebody said, "Happy Easter," and you said, "And to you. He has risen indeed." Yet the reality of your life, the reality of your marriage, is that it's broken, and you feel lonely, and you feel desperate, and you feel angry, and here you are.

There are those in here who struggle in regard to sexual purity, and there are those in here who are flirting with people who aren't their spouses, and there are those who... On and on and on I could go here. What we just saw is that God, in his initiating love, leaned towards us, not away from us. **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."**

It's important for you to notice just a couple of things here. First, when it calls Jesus the "Son of God," that doesn't mean he was born from some goddess up there and he's kind of the best of God's kids he sent down to rescue. That's not what happened. He is begotten of, from the same substance of. He is God in the flesh. He's not just kind of a magic man; he's God. He's God in the flesh, Immanuel, God with us.

So God, in his leaning in, meeting us where we are right in the middle of our junk, sends Christ to be the righteousness we would need. Listen. Your righteousness, you at your best, is never going to be adequate to cancel the record of debt. You're never going to be good enough to save yourself. *Ever*. That's why God, in his great love with which he loves us, leaned in. He was not repulsed by, but rather came to rescue. In fact, John 3:17 is going to say, "The Son of Man did not come to condemn the world, but rather to save the world." Christ has not come to condemn, but rather to remove from you that condemnation.

Now how does he do that? God so loves the world, that he *gives* the only begotten Son. He comes, God in the flesh, Immanuel, and he lives a perfect, spotless, righteous life that you and I, by the grace of God, are given, granted, imputed to us, so that when God sees us he actually sees the righteous acts of Christ. Then the cross of Jesus Christ, Good Friday, is going to be that moment when all of our sin and rebellion, past, present, and future, are put on Christ, and he absorbs them fully.

My son Reid asked us on Friday when we were talking about Good Friday, "Why do they call Good Friday, 'Good Friday' if that's when they killed Jesus?" That's a great question. That's not a 7-year-old question. Let me tell you my favorite thing about Good Friday. My favorite thing about Good Friday is that God publicly, efficiently, and for all time outed me. He just completely outed me, and now that outing has set me free.

Here's what I mean by that. God publicly acknowledges, "Matt Chandler is going to need a Savior. He's going to fall short. He's going to be far from perfect. He's going to need me." God outed me, so I can stand in front of you, and maybe you like me, maybe you don't, but I get to sleep well tonight. Maybe you come back, maybe you don't, but I'm going to sleep really well tonight. The reason I can say, "Hey, the first seven years of my marriage were a nightmare," is because I don't have to pretend my entire marriage with my wife was euphoric bliss. It wasn't. We needed a Savior.

I don't have to be more than I am. I can just go, "You know, sometimes I still doubt." I have to preach the gospel to myself a lot. It's still at times hard for me to believe God loves me like I am. I still keep thinking he's going to love some future version of me better than the one right now. I have to preach that to myself. I have to memorize Scripture and quote those Scriptures to myself often. I got set free by what? By Good Friday. Because God already told you I'm a bum. God already told me *you* were a bum. How great is that?

I don't have to pretend I'm anything for you. I don't have to play a part. I don't have to be a puppet. I don't have to do any of that. Why? Because of Good Friday. Jesus set me free from all of that. God said, "I'm just going to let you know everyone is a bum." *Bam!* Right there. Good Friday. "Now be honest, because I've outed you. Don't pretend, because I've already decreed and declared and let people know everyone is broken. Look at what I had to do."

That's why we call Good Friday, "Good Friday," because on it we are outed and our sins are absorbed in the cross of Christ. So here we are, brothers and sisters, loved by God, God leaning in to us. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever..." Or "whosoever" if you're King James-ing on me. "...whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Now a couple of things to note here. First and foremost, notice not everyone is going to benefit from the Lord initiating in his love towards us. It says, "Whosoever believes in *him*." In who? In Jesus, the only begotten Son. Who did what? Who lived a righteous life on our behalf and who died our death. So whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life. "Will not perish but have eternal life" cuts in a couple different directions.

Eternal life. Yes, in the future and for eternity, hence the phrase *eternal life*, but we also learn in John 10:10 that he's talking about the fullness of life now. It's not just that we get heaven, but that even now Christ, and our belief in Christ, grants us fullness of life now. Then, in the same way, *perishing* would be not just eternal perishing, but actual perishing even in the here and now.

Now let's talk about belief. I think we have to do a little bit of work around the word *belief*. When it says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in him will not perish but have eternal life," it is not intellectual assent. Are you tracking with what I'm saying there? It's not just, "Oh yeah, I believe in Jesus." To believe in Jesus in John 3:16 is to believe he is who he says he is and he did what he said he did.

Far too many of us believe in Jesus like we believe in JFK. He's kind of a historic figure who did some cool stuff, then died an untimely death. No, no. *Belief* is that I believe he is who he says he is and he did what he said he did. See, all of a sudden this puts us in a bit of a bind. It puts us in a bit of a corner, because Jesus says he's God. He says he's the only way *to* God. Listen. I've been down here long enough to know if you're from the South, of course you believe in Jesus. You're an American. It's a cultural norm to believe in Jesus in the South.

What the Bible means when it says those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life is to believe he is who he says he is and he did what he said he did. So let me translate this in a way I think some of you probably won't like but I'm going to love you enough to say. Believing in Jesus means you've declared war on the sin in your life and that you're serious about growing in your knowledge with God. Look at me. If those things are not true about you, you do not believe in Jesus.

Do you hear me? If there's no seriousness about sin in your life and no desire for you to grow in an understanding of who God is and who Jesus is, you don't believe in him. You believe in Jesus like you believe in some sort of historic figure, but you do not believe in him in regard to eternal life. **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."**

Now how can we have confidence in this? How can we really believe this to be true and latch on to it? Well, in my 15 years with Lauren, I have more than likely broken right around 350 to 400 promises, or so she says. (I'm kidding. She has never said that. She's awesome.) In that, I've broken some of those promises because I'm a jerk. I'm a sinful jerk, and out of spite I just said, "Okay, I know I said that, but I'm not doing it." You can judge me if you want, but that has happened.

The second reason is I'm not all-powerful, I'm not all-knowing, and I'm not everywhere at once. So sometimes I've broken promises by no maliciousness in my own heart but simply because I don't control the universe. An example would be I have a ghetto car that sometimes won't start, so sometimes I can say, "I'll be home around this time," and that simply doesn't happen. There have been promises I've been unable to keep simply because I'm not God.

In the same way, there are promises she has made to me that she has been unable to keep, sometimes because she's malicious and a jerk, and most of the time because she's not God. I am not always able to keep my promises, and she is not able to keep her promises, but God stands outside of that, not limited as we are limited, as a God who never breaks his promises. What we see that bolsters our confidence in God's initiating love for us in Jesus Christ is really what we're here to celebrate this morning. It's the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

See, if Jesus dies on the cross but isn't resurrected, how do we know all our sin is paid for? If Jesus dies on the cross but isn't raised from the dead, how do we know sin has been defeated and that death is dead? How do we know? We don't without the resurrection. The resurrection stands for us as believers as the apex of God's love made manifest for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection is what makes us look so foolish to the world around us. I've never been offended when people who don't know Jesus think we're fools. I thought we were fools right up until I became one of us. In the end, if you pinch Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22... You have those four chapters. In those four chapters, things go really, really well for the people of God. Then the whole rest of the Bible is filled with sorrow, with loss, with oppression. Do you know there's a book of the Bible called Lamentations? Have you ever thought about it? There's a whole book that's just laments from God's people.

We are a people who historically, if you pay attention to it, have been slaves, have been oppressed, have been scattered throughout the earth. We have been killed. We have been crucified. We have been fed to lions. We have been at every angle hard-pressed by the world around us, and yet woven into the tapestry of all of that is rejoicing. God's people have always been marked as those who rejoice, regardless of circumstance.

This past week we did a funeral on Thursday for Tedashii and Danielle Anderson. Their 1-year-old son last Saturday went down for a nap and just didn't wake up. So we went to that funeral on Thursday. It was about four hours long, and we just got after the Lord. We sang and laughed and shared the Word of God and wept and wept some more and sang some more and prayed some more, and woven into the tapestry of one of the most heartbreaking things imaginable was a steadfast rejoicing in God.

Now how is that possible? Because we're confident that God, in his initiating love, has made a way for us to not only be reconciled, but there will be a day where there is a physical resurrection, that Christ in his resurrection is the firstfruits of a resurrection from among the dead of all those who have believed in the name of Jesus.

So in my head (this is complete conjecture), on Thursday I tried to get around what Chase would look like in his resurrected body. I don't know that he'll be 1. I don't know *what* he'll be. I don't know what *any* of us will be, but the Bible says we will throw off what is perishable (this body we're wearing right now), and we'll put on what's imperishable, and on that day, 1 Corinthians 15 says we actually mock death. "O death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"

So what went into my weird little brain at that funeral is that day, that all things are made new upon the resurrection, and Tedashii has his new imperishable body, and Danielle has her new imperishable body, and Jaden has his new imperishable body, and there's little Chase with his new imperishable body with all of us and *our* imperishable bodies, going, "Where are you at now, death? What you got now, death? Nothing." All that is sad will become untrue. We put our hope there.

In fact, here's what I'll say to you. This is our message. This is all we have. In fact, when we gather in here week in and week out, this is all we talk about. I've joked for years I just have one sermon. I just keep preaching it out of different texts. You want to talk about marriage? We have to go here. You want to talk about raising kids? We have to go here. You want to talk about money? We have to go here. You want to talk about breaking the power of addiction? We have to go here. You want to talk about freedom? We have to go here. You want to talk about how to end oppression? We have to go here.

Over and over and over again, the base foundation of all human need is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. So when we come together, here's what we do week in and week out. We sing about this. In fact, all of the songs you sang before I came out here were about this. Then we open up the Word of God and talk about this. Then in different times and in different seasons we celebrate other ways. In fact, God has given us ways the church is to celebrate this in a way that mirrors or reveals really what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

One of those is baptism. In baptism somebody gets in the water. The water is not magic. This building used to be an Albertsons, so it's just Flower Mound water here, Dallas water, Fort Worth water, Denton water. It's just city water, the same stuff you're getting at your house. A man or woman gets in that water, and they, for the good of the saints, mirror what God has done for us. They testify to the saving work of Jesus Christ. They are put under the water, symbolic of the death of Christ. They don't stay there. Right? We raise them out of the water, and if you have roots in the Baptist church, they are raised to walk in the newness of life.

What's happening in that moment is we're mirroring, showing, reminding the saints of God we have died with Christ, and we have been raised with Christ, and it stirs up our hope that God's initiating love for us in Christ is real, true, good, and present, and we need it. So on Easter weekend, how foolish would we be if

we didn't take a few minutes and watch such a picture of God's initiating love for us? I'm going to pray, and then we're going to watch a baptism or so, and then I'm going to come back out and there will be one more thing I want to chat with you about. Let's pray.

Father, thank you again for your initiating love, just knowing full well who we are and how we've come here and how we've walked into this place. You are good and you do good, Father. Thank you for the testimonies we're about to hear. I pray you would encourage our hearts. It's through your beautiful name, amen.

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