

NO, REALLY. IT'S FREE!

John 3:16. Do you know what that Bible verse says? Even many people who are basically illiterate when it comes to knowing the Bible know what John 3:16 says.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

You recognize those words, right? For Christians, that's one of the most cherished verses in the entire Bible. It's such a shame, then, that very few of us really believe it.

Ooh, maybe I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean to hurt anyone's feelings. Here I am, talking about this passage we cherish so much, and then I go and make the claim that many of us don't actually believe it. Let me make it clear that I'm not accusing you of being a hypocrite. I'm accusing you of being human. I'm saying that many of us—and that includes me, by the way—often misread this verse, or misinterpret the entire passage in John's Gospel where verse 3:16 is found, not because we're dumb and can't read well, but simply because we're human.

You see, the church—being the human institution that it is—usually quotes the first part of this verse as a declarative statement. “God so loved the world . . . .” So far so good. But then it turns the second part of the verse into a question and a nagging doubt, which sounds something like this. “God loved the world so much that God gave us Jesus; but, are you actually righteous enough for God to love you?”

The first part of John 3:16 talks about a gift. But then we move past that gift faster than a child moves from one present to the next on Christmas morning. We leave God's gift behind and transform it at the speed of light into a reward for good behavior. If we're honest with ourselves and look at the way we live our lives and practice our faith, we have to confess that we're shaped and influenced more by God's reward than by God's gift.

For example, we love to sing *Amazing Grace*, but do we actually agree with the words we sing? Think about the passive role described in the first verse. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see.”

Notice how it's all done to us and for us. We're saved. We're found.

We're given sight. All of those things are done for us, by God, without any requirement except to believe and accept it.

So, be honest. Do you believe that? Or in your mind do you struggle with the idea of being given the grace and love of God absolutely free, at no cost to you? We may love to sing the words to *Amazing Grace* that are printed in the hymnal, but the lyrics that are really burned into our hearts say something like: "Amazing grace is what I gained by doing what is right. I once was bad, but now I've changed; so on me shines God's light." I guess it's just not in our human nature to trust in something that's free. Instead, we believe we only get what we deserve, what we earn, what we pay for.

A number of years ago, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that in Beaumont, Texas, the town government decided to do away with the practice of charging for downtown parking. Just imagine: parking was free of charge. The town publicized the change in the local paper so everyone would know about it, but an interesting thing happened: people didn't believe it. They continued to put money in the parking meters. City workers put up street signs with the words "Free Parking," but people still didn't believe it. They kept putting money in the parking meters anyway. The police even put duct tape over the coin slots on the meters to prevent people from paying. But people just couldn't believe that the parking downtown was free. They tore off or cut slits in the tape so they could put their coins in the parking meters and pay to park, even though they had been given free parking.

That story is pretty funny; but then again, maybe it's pretty sad, too. Because it's a strong indication that most people—and possibly you and I—don't trust free gifts; which must also mean they don't really trust the gift givers. We think gifts always have strings attached. We believe in an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. We believe God's grace doesn't mean salvation is a free, undeserved gift. We believe our salvation is a reward we have to earn. We believe those things not because we're stupid or foolish, but because we're human. Our human nature tells us we must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and work hard to gain God's love. We think we have to pander to God, kiss up to God in order to get God to love us. To put what I've been saying a little differently, we're human the way Nicodemus was human.

Let me put this morning's reading from John's Gospel into context. Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of night and offered Jesus a little praise—a little kissing up, if you will. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus would have nothing to do with Nicodemus's attempt to flatter,

and he quickly changed the subject. Out of the blue he said, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

The Greek word *anōthen*, which our NIV Bibles translate “born again,” actually has two meanings. It can mean “born again,” and it can also mean “born from above.”

Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus. He thought Jesus was telling him he needed to literally be born again, which led to Nicodemus’s confusion about how an old guy like him could possibly climb back into his mother’s womb and be reborn. That would be hard work! But that wasn’t what Jesus was saying To Nicodemus. Jesus was talking about being born “from above,” through the work of the Holy Spirit. And that means Nicodemus and you and I don’t have anything to do with it; being born from above is totally God’s doing, not ours.

Being born again is something people often claim to have done. And sometimes they can even give you the date they did it: “I was born again on November 2nd, 2011. That was the day I accepted Jesus into my life.” But being born from above isn’t something we can do. Being born from above means being born by a new parent, born by the one who descended from heaven, born by the Spirit. And the Spirit is like the wind: it blows where it will. Just as you can’t do anything to control the wind, you can’t do anything to control the Spirit. God’s Spirit is an uncontrollable, untamable, unearned, free gift. We’re not in control of our new birth, just as we’re not in control of our own salvation. That’s not how a gift works!

God loves us so much that God gave us God’s Son. Let those words, “God gave us,” hang over your head like the huge, gaudy bronze serpent that was lifted up for the Israelites in the wilderness so they could look upon it and be healed. Like Jesus being lifted up on the cross over the whole human race. Like Jesus being raised from the dead and exalted at the right hand of God.

God gave us God’s Son. That statement is in the past tense; it’s a gift already given to us, and not a future reward we must work for to receive. So, to receive that divine gift God gave us, we need to let go of our self-reliance and simply receive it. Then we can rejoice and celebrate God’s gift, rather than trying to control it.

Remember, God gave us God’s Son. Christ was amazingly given to us. Jesus was God’s amazing grace, in the flesh, freely bestowed. God gave his son to us.

In spite of our inclination not to trust in God’s grace, it’s really all around us. We can see it everywhere, when we open our eyes to it. The world actually abounds with free gifts of grace that are rooted in God’s goodness and reflect the greatest free gift that was ever given: God giving God’s very self to us in

Jesus.

One of those gifts of grace could be seen in the midst of the horror that happened at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where Aaron Feis, a football coach and security guard at the school, shielded some students from the shooter to protect them, and as a result he was shot and killed. Those students didn't earn that selfless, ultimate sacrifice; it was freely given to them. Feis gave them a gracious gift of the kind Christ gave to the world, and because of it some students lived through one of the most horrific and deadly school tragedies in our nation's history. God bless Aaron Feis for what he did on behalf of those kids.

Another visible sign of God's gift of free grace is, simply, love. Think about it. Why do we love someone else, sometimes more than life itself? That's an unanswerable question. We don't know why we love someone, we just do. Because genuine love isn't earned; it's simply and freely given to another. In other words, it's a gift.

And consider the sacrament of baptism. What has an infant done to earn the gift of baptism and be received into the church of Jesus Christ? Not a single thing, of course. An infant isn't able to do anything to earn a reward. An infant just is. He or she, like all of us, is simply a passive recipient of God's undeserved divine grace. God gives it to them freely and without merit.

In a little while, we will all participate in the Lord's Supper. In our church we have what is called an open table. We don't require you to subscribe to a certain set of beliefs to receive the bread and cup. We don't demand that you become a member of this congregation or need to belong to a church. We don't interrogate you to see if you're righteous enough, or check your credentials to see if you've been baptized. We don't require anything because we don't extend the invitation to come to the sacred meal. This isn't our table. It's Christ's table, and it's Christ himself who invites us to come. And the words that hang in the very air over that altar; the words that are spoken every time we celebrate Holy Communion; the words that epitomize Christ's invitation to us, and are spoken at every service of Holy Communion as the bread is lifted up and the cup is held out, are, "Given for you."

Given for you. Not as a reward. You can't do anything to earn a place at the table of the Lord, just as you can't do anything to earn a place in God's heart. Because God's love, God's salvation, God's eternal life, aren't prizes that are won by our good behavior, but are gifts that we receive only by the grace of God. Yes, given for you. God gave. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . ." It was an unearned, free gift.

No, really. It's free! Thanks be to God. Amen.