
John 3:16 on Rooftops: “For God So Loved THE WORLD!”

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When I grew up riding down the various country roads of rural Georgia, there were two roadside signs that I was always sure to see. One was the bright red lettering along barn roofs and on pasture signs that commanded: “See Rock City!” Of course, one has to see Rock City, especially if one has lived within a two hundred mile radius of Lookout Mountain (in both Tennessee AND in Georgia, by the way).

The other familiar roadside sign, not just in Georgia but maybe almost everywhere, and usually not scripted anything like the deliberation of Rock City signs, was the simple phrase: “John 3:16.” Yes, it was the famous Bible verse, John 3:16. But the way in which that verse was placed usually made it a foreboding sign. It was often grouped with other signs, saying things like, “Repent!”, “Prepare to meet the Lord!”, and “Judgment Day is Coming.”

So it is that I grew up, perhaps like you, associating John 3:16 with condemnation and judgment. And that is too bad, because John 3:16 may be one of the most loving verses in the Bible. Thus, as one of my tasks in life, I have taken on the challenge of trying to redeem the meaning of one of the most commonly seen verses in the Bible! In fact, it is quite clearly about love: “For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Sometimes I like to shorten that verse so that it says simply that “God loved the world so much that he *gave*.” Like God, people who love are people who simply give.

But there are two more redeeming features of this verse! The verse claims that God loved the *world*, in particular! Now, we Christians often speak cautiously about “the world.” I myself have often said that God’s way is not the way of “the world” and that we should be wary of the way of “the world.” But John 3:16 claims that God actually loves *the world* – yes, “the *world*,” with all its weaknesses and fragility and disappointment. The world can be a challenging place. Yet, even with its challenges and fallen-ness, the world is loved by God.

Finally, there is one further way to disassociate John 3:16 from any character of condemnation or judgment. The verse that appears right after John 3:16, that is, verse 17, says specifically that Jesus did not come to condemn! “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Wow! I still haven’t done it yet, but the next time I see John 3:16 scrawled upon some sign, or even upon some clearly established common wall space, and if it is at all legal or permissible, I want to scribble the phrase “John 3:17” right below where it says “John 3:16”!

Contrary to its associations, the verse John 3:16 is about love; it is about loving the world, and it is about God loving so much that God gives. I believe in that gift, that gift of the Son. Jesus comes into the world not to condemn, but to save!



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