

“The Best Word Ever”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Back in 2002, I had the opportunity to attend a Billy Graham School of Evangelism gathering in Cincinnati. The purpose (of the event) was to challenge those of us who were there with not only the importance of sharing our faith, but also with the faith itself.

One of the presenters was Dr. Ross Rhoads who, at that time, was on the Board of Directors for Samaritan's Purse, and served as one of the national representatives for Operation Christmas Child. When I first heard him, I was unfamiliar with either of those ministries. Since then, as you know, our congregation has become strong supporters of both.

His presentation was titled “What is the Gospel?” He walked us through portions of 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter often referred to as the “Great Resurrection Chapter” of the New Testament. He took us, verse by verse through passages that point to what God has done for us in Christ and why (what he has done) is essential for our salvation and so needed in our world today.

In the process, he referred to a little book titled “The Best Word Ever.” Written by a Baptist preacher named J. Sidlow Baxter, it's a book that walks (not verse by verse), but word by word through one of the most important and most loaded verses you'll ever find.

John 3:16 is sometimes called “The Little Bible” because it contains such a simple and straightforward summary of all of the essential truths of the Christian faith. Everything we need to know about who God is, what he has done, the problem we face, how we might be saved, and where this life is leading are all found in that one verse.

The trouble is, (with verses like that), because we've heard them so often, it's easy to miss the significance of what's being said. It's like the Lord's Prayer. If we don't stop to think about what we're praying, (as we're praying it), it's easy to simply recite the words from rote and be done. What we don't want to do today (with this verse), and with this passage, is to simply recite it and be done.

What if we did something similar to what Dr. Rhoads did (with 1 Corinthians 15), to what Dr. Baxter did in his little book? What if we took the time and worked our way through this one verse, not word by word, but in a number of little phrases? You take the whole thing, there are 27 words. What if we were to divide those words into nine parts? It would go like this: “God...so loved...the world...that he gave...his only Son...that whoever...believes in him...might not perish...but have eternal life.”

What do you think? A nine-point sermon! That's a preacher's dream. (It's the old), “How many points should there be in a good sermon?” “At least one.” There's more than one in this one little verse. There are at least nine. No wonder they call it the little Bible.

It's so familiar, it's easy to miss. What do you think? Can you handle it? Let's try it. (I promise to keep it moving.) I hope it doesn't feel too structured. Let's look at each of those little phrases, in this nine-point sermon, and see what we can find.

“The Best Word Ever.” It starts with the simple word God. It starts with the simple word God. What better starting point for a summary of the Bible? What better starting point for the Christian faith.

It's Genesis 1: “In the beginning, God...” Before anything else, God...” Before the world was created, there was God. Before people began to appear, there was God.

Before cars were invented, before the computer became a reality, before telephones, before the internet, before Google or Facebook or Apple, before anything that is part of our world today, (including you and me) there was God.

What better starting point for a summary of our faith than to start with God. After all, the initiative (for what we believe) rests with God. What we know about God has been revealed to us by him. Even the gospel, (what we're talking about here today), is something God has done and not us.

Now this is basic. (It needs to be.) Christianity is not a man-made religion. If that's the question, then all of a sudden it's a different game. All of a sudden, it's us trying to figure it all out, us trying to find out how it

works. But that's not how it works. How it works is that it's been done by God. What's to figure out is that it all rests with him. It all starts with God.

And so what kind of God is this? What's this God like? Is he just a vague impersonal force, the Grand Architect of the universe? Or is there more? The second thing this verse says is that ours is a God who loves us. "God...so loved..." That's good to know. He's a God who loves, a God who cares. We hear it so often. Maybe even take it for granted, but we shouldn't.

It's not the case with other religions. Many of the world religions follow gods to be feared. (Now, in some ways, we do, too.) Luther says we're to "fear, love, and trust God above anything else." There's nothing wrong with a healthy fear. But if you want a definition of love, look to God. If we want a depiction of love, want to see it in its most genuine form, you'll find it in him.

John says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us." Paul says that our life's goal ought to be to grow each day (in what he calls) "the breadth and height and depth" of God's love.

God, so loved...the world. #3, the whole world, nothing left out. No one excluded. An undeserving world. A rebellious world. A world that had turned its back on its Creator. The Creator didn't turn his back on the world. He created the world. He loved the world.

It doesn't matter; it's all within the scope of God's love, everything, everyone. Black and white, red and brown, male and female, east and west, rich and poor, gay and straight, atheist, agnostic, Christian; it doesn't matter.

When Jesus hung on the cross the entire world was being redeemed. That's what happened. He bought it back. He paid the price. He took upon himself our sin. Nothing (and no one) was left out.

God so loved the world...that he gave. Point #4: Don't ever forget that love requires giving. (It's built in.) No exceptions. No possibility without it. You can't have the one without doing the other.

Parents, if you love your kids, you need to give. Children, if you love your Mom and Dad, don't forget. You can't love, without giving. You can't love, without sacrifice.

Do you want to test your love sometime, either to God or to a person or to the world? Ask the question: "How much am I giving? What much am I willing to sacrifice?"

It's more than an emotion. It's more than what we feel. It's a commitment. It's a sacrifice. It's what we're willing to give. "God so love the world that he gave..." If he didn't, he wouldn't; but he does and so he did.

What did he give? (We're up to #5.) He gave his Son. He allowed his one and only Son to die so that we could live. Even the Son (it says) gave himself. (You remember.) "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends." That's what Jesus did for us. That's what Jesus did for you.

Would I give my life for you? Would you give your life for me? (Maybe so? It all depends.) I hope we don't need to find out. But would I give one of my children so you could live? Would I sacrifice an only son so that someone who'd done nothing to deserve it could get off?

Ours is a Christ-centered faith. It all depends on Jesus. Everything stands or falls based upon his claims and what he did. All of the Old Testament builds up to it. All of the New Testament is a proclamation that it happened. If it didn't happen, it didn't happen. And if it didn't happen, then it doesn't work. The good news is that it works, and it works because God was willing to give; and not just to give, but to give his only Son.

The gift of Christ. That's what we believe. Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, everything in between. It's all about him. This is Lent: 40 days to get it right.

Do you want a picture of love? If you had to paint (on a piece of canvas) what love was like, what would you paint? How about a cross on a hillside with a man hanging on it? Could you do any better?

That's the good news. Then comes even better news, the unqualified offer that comes with it. (#6), one little word: whoever...whoever. It doesn't matter who. God so loved the world, nothing's left out, but here's where it gets personal. Whoever!

Go down the list. Peter and James, Matthew and Judas, the thief on the cross, the adulterous woman, the widowed mother, the Roman centurion. Even Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas – whoever! You! Me! It's unrestricted.

Life condition doesn't matter. Past history becomes irrelevant. Personal background or status, what you know or you don't, who cares? It's whoever!

Whoever thirsts, come to the water. Whoever's hungry, there's enough to eat. All you need to do is to come. All you need to do is to trust and to believe that it's true.

"Whoever believes...in him." (Point #7.) Not just belief (in God), but in Jesus. Not just a knowledge that God exists, (and that there's a heaven and a hell), but that it all depends upon him; and that in him, it all happened for you.

Sometimes (I think) we make it harder than it needs to be; we think we have to do something. Sometimes (I think) we make it not hard enough, thinking that whatever we believe, it's all the same. It's not all the same. It's only in Jesus. It's not that we simply believe, but that what we believe is in Christ.

It's already been given. (It's already been done.) God gave his only Son. We can't change that. We can't undo what has already happened. It's already happened. "While we were yet sinners (the Bible says), Jesus died on the cross for us." All we can do is to accept what God has done; receive the gift.

Now, is it possible to refuse it? (Sure it is.) You can give back any gift you get. In fact, one of the saddest verses in the Bible is in today's reading. (We do have that power.) "This is the verdict (it says) "Light has come into the world (God gave the gift of his Son), but men loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil." It can happen, and it does.

But why would you do that? Why would you give it back? All you have to do is to accept. All you have to do is trust...and not in your ability to trust, but in Jesus, in the cross, in what God has done for you in Christ.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith." (That was our second reading today.) And even "that (it says) is not your own doing; it's a gift from God. It's not because of works, lest any of us can boast." We can't. It's not our doing. It's his. If we're to boast, we're to boast in Jesus.

And so what's the end result? Where does this all lead? (We're now at #8.) "Whoever believes in him...shall not perish." We're not going to perish. What does it mean to perish? It means we're going to die. Every one of us is going to die.

The person sitting in front of you is going to die. The person sitting behind you is going to die. The person next to you, the person next to the one next to you, they're all going to die. You're going to die. I'm going to die. We're all going to die. "The wages of sin is death." (It's what we deserve.) It's coming, for every one of us.

We're all going to perish...but it's not the end. We're all going to die...but it's not the final word. "Whoever lives and believes in me (Jesus said) will never die."

What did he mean by that? What does it mean to die? It means that we become separated from God. That's what hell is: it's an eternal separation. It means that forever we'll be apart from God.

That's what happens without Jesus. That's what happens without Christ. Don't think it's not going to happen. It is going to happen. Don't think it's not going to be the case. It is the case. Jesus spoke about heaven and hell many times. If it weren't true, he wouldn't have said it. If it wasn't going to happen, it wouldn't have happened. But it is, so he did. It is, so it will.

That's why God did what he did in sending and giving his Son. "Jesus didn't come to condemn us" (it says). "He came to save us." He didn't come to cast us out, but to call us in. What God wants is to have you with him forever. What God wants, he was willing to sacrifice his Son to make it happen.

And that brings us to the final point, #9, the opposite of perishing and death. "Whoever believes in him shall not perish...but have eternal life." Just as death is eternal separation from God, life eternal is forever in the presence of God.

Now, the Bible gives us many images of what that will be like; no more crying, no more suffering, no more pain. The lion will lie down with the lamb. The child will play with the snake and not be harmed. (It'll be beautiful!) When we get there, we'll be able to see it. When we find ourselves in heaven, then we'll know fully everything that now we can only begin to imagine.

Paul says, "Now we see through a glass dimly; then we shall see face to face." Now we see (and know) in part, then we shall see and know as it actually is.

Until then, we have the Bible. Until then, we have the Word of God. Until then, we have passages like this, giving us a summary of all we need to know.

Our bulletin cover today makes the point. On the cross of Jesus, God's plan to save the world was carried out. He loved this world so much that he was willing to sacrifice his only Son.

Let me close with this. Sometime later this week, when you have a few moments, do (by yourself) what we did here today. Think through John 3:16 again, word by word, phrase by phrase, thanking God for all he has done.

Do it this week. Do it next week. Do it often and from memory. As you do, it will increasingly become “The Best Word Ever.” Amen.