

**John 3:16-18** *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup>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.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

What a world we live in! It seems to be a mess, doesn't it? We hear about a different shooting every other day. We see corruption at the highest levels. People don't just bicker and quarrel anymore; it seems as if they are bent on destroying each other. There is little common courtesy. People look out way more for themselves than anyone else. Terrorists are committed to wiping out anyone who isn't Muslim. If you cut the wrong person off—however accidentally—you now have to worry about them pulling out a gun and retaliating. Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden this world has been a stinking cesspool of sin that gets worse every year. Read the newspaper. Turn on the TV. Rottenness, corruption, and immorality are all around us. Hate and hurt and abuse, lying and cheating and stealing, jealousy and arrogance and injustice are everywhere. It's easy to look all around us and ask, "Does God really love this world?" There are many people who simply do not believe that God loves this world. Many look at this world and conclude that either there is no God because there can't be with this kind of suffering and corruption or there is a God but he certainly isn't loving because there's no way a loving God would allow all of this. Does God really love the world?

That's a hard enough question to ask. Perhaps even more difficult is the question: Does God really love me? In the moments when life is overwhelming, when you are sitting all alone with your head in your hands, tears streaming down your face and have no clue what to do next, it's tempting to ask, "Does God really love me?" Maybe you lost a friend, a spouse or a family member. Or it could be a chronic or terminal illness has overtaken you. Maybe you've had a run of bad luck or faced some really unfortunate circumstances. Maybe someone you love and care for has turned completely on you out of the blue and hurt you in a way you never could have possibly imagined and you ask, "Does God really love me?" Add to all of this the crushing weight and loads of guilt and shame that you carry with you on your shoulders for the sins you have committed. That's when it's really easy to ask: Who could love someone who has so many things to feel guilty about? Who could love someone who did those kinds of things? The memories of sins committed in the past bear down on our consciences and we can do nothing about it. Even worse, our sin isn't just in the past. We still find ourselves engaging in petty arguments and quarrels, filled with jealousy, envy and greed, clinging tightly to sins and pleasures we know should bring us shame but we can't let go. Who could love someone who has so much to feel guilty about? Who could love someone who has such terrible thoughts going through their head? Who love could me? Does God really love me?

Yes. Yes, he does. That's the simple answer. That's what this night is all about. This is what fills us with such joy as we celebrate this Christmas Eve. More than the presents and food and even gathering with family, tonight God reminds us in such a spectacular way that he not only loves the world—he loves you! It might be shocking to hear that God loves this world that is filled with people who do such horrible things. It might be mind-blowing to think that God would care so much for a world that cares so little about him. Yet it's even more amazing to think that while you might feel unlovable or that no one loves you or cares for you, tonight Jesus assures you that even if no one else loves you—God loves you!

Listen to John: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" God loves you. If God loves the world, that means he loves every person in the world. You're part of the world and that means he loves you. How can we be certain of this? Talk is cheap. We hear people say, "I love you all the time" and then go out and do very unloving things. Just because someone says they love you doesn't guarantee that they actually do. God didn't just promise that he loves us. He proved it. We know God loves us because he put his love into action. Our text tells us, "*God so loved the world that he gave.*" His love led him to give for you. What did he give you? Not a million dollars, not a new car or a cabin on the lake. He gave you his own son. Just think about that. God loved you so much that he was willing to give you His own Son as a sacrifice for your sins. If you had 10 children, you wouldn't be willing to give even one of them up so that somebody else's child would live. What kind of a parent would make that kind of a decision?

But your God did! He gave his one and only Son to be your substitute. That's what tonight is all about. That little baby who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger is God's gift to you. No matter what else you unwrap later tonight or tomorrow morning, it will not compare to the gift God gave to you when he willingly sent His Son into this world to be your Savior. All that guilt and all that shame that you feel for your sins is not all that you deserve. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Gethsemane, death was the punishment God demanded for sin. And this is not just physical death but eternal death—being separated from God eternally in hell. That's what every person who sins deserves to face. It's hard to talk about something so deep and scary like death and hell on such a festive night. But it's only when we fully come to grips with the fact that we sin and the fact that the consequences we deserve for our sin is death that we see in Jesus the peace and joy that only he can bring. In fact, this is truly what makes this night so joyous. God loved us so much that he willingly sent his Son into the world so that he could face death in your place. That baby born in Bethlehem did for you what you could not do. He restored your relationship with God. He willingly went from lying in the manger to hanging on a cross where he paid the price God demanded for sin. Because of the perfect sacrifice Jesus made for you on Calvary's cross, God the Father is now able to say to you: "I forgive you! I will no longer hold your sins against you. You

will not be punished for your sins because Jesus was punished in your place.” You can let go of all the guilt and shame which weighs so heavily upon you. You need not fear God’s anger or worry about his punishment. All the difficult problems you face are not God’s punishment for wrongs you have done. In other words, God isn’t punishing you for the things you have done by allowing these troubles in your life. God already punished Jesus in your place. Jesus already made a full and complete payment for your sins. Despite the problems and troubles that you face in life, you can be certain of your relationship with God and be at peace. And there we see God’s love for the world...and God’s love for you. Jesus faced death so that you can be certain of eternal life.

We’re tempted to ask, “What’s the catch?” It seems too easy for us. There must be a cost, we reason. With something this wonderful, there’s always a catch. We want to look around and say, “Now what do I have to do?” The simple answer is: Nothing. You don’t have to do anything. Just believe. Jesus tells us: “*Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life...Whoever believes in him is not condemned.*” Even this gift of faith—this ability to believe in Jesus as your Savior and hold tightly to him—is a gift of God. He loved you so much he not only gave His Son to be your Savior he also gave you faith to believe this. There’s no catch. Faith isn’t a doing. It’s a receiving. Faith is simply a trust in the word of the one who said it. God not only said it. He proved it. Just hold tightly to that promise and be certain you will enjoy the benefits of the forgiveness of your sins and the certainty of eternal life. God loves you.

You can hold tightly to that as you go forward in your life. While Christmas is a time of calm and peace and joy, it will all too quickly pass and you will be back to your busy lives. It won’t be too long until you are back to the realities of this world with all its stress and sadness and sin. If Christmas was nothing more than parties and presents, it would have nothing to offer when we return to the realities of this world. But tonight, we are reminded and assured that Christmas is much more than parties and presents. Christmas is proof that God loves the world. It is proof that God loves you. God loves you despite what you face. The fact that God loves you doesn’t mean that the hard times will disappear. John didn’t say that God loved you so much that he gave you a person to walk by your side...or that he gave you all the money you could ever want...or that he gave you nothing but pleasure and joy so that you would never feel rejection or pain or disappointment in the world. He loves you so much he gave you His Son to be your Savior and rescue you from death. Christmas reminds us that you are loved despite the hard times and throughout them as well. Remember this when the times get tough and you are tempted to wonder if God cares. Remember this when you are weighed down with sin and you are tempted to wonder how God could love someone like you. He does. The baby in the manger says so. Just look to his empty cross and be reminded constantly how much God loves you! Then you can have a Merry Christmas all year long. Amen.