

Dear friends,

I'm happy to see all of you in church today. This is a special day when we've asked our members to bring somebody to church with them. If you are a guest with us today, we are so pleased to have you take the time to be with us. I am confident that God will work through his Word to bless you. If you haven't been in a church in a while, I'm not going to lay on the guilt trip. You're here now, and I think that's awesome.

Everyone has different reasons for not coming to church, but I wonder if one of the reasons is that the message of Christianity seems both complicated and not especially applicable to our real lives. All of us get frustrated when we don't understand. When I was in grade school, I used to love math. When I got to high school, I still loved math. I breezed through Algebra 1, loved Geometry, was quite challenged by Algebra II but still hung in there. Then came my senior year. We did some calculus and some trigonometry. And that was the first time I just couldn't get it. I tried to understand and I just couldn't get my head around some of those concepts. And it seemed things turned theoretical, and were no longer applicable! My love for math faded quickly.

It wouldn't be too hard for a Seminary trained pastor to evoke the same feeling in you at church. In view of Biblical anthropology, we see how necessary is to study of soteriology. And only with a proper Christology will we have hope and certainty as we consider the eschatology revealed by God. And we all understand that only with the proper hermeneutic and always in view of the analogy of faith will grasp what God is teaching us about justification which will result in a life of sanctification. That's just how things work in the Kingdom of God.

If that has been your experience in church, then I can hardly blame you for not coming. So today we will make a concerted effort to just make it all as simple and understandable as possible... and applicable!

So let's make this as simple and universally applicable as possible. I want to address something that every single person in here today has in common. And what is that? What does the 1 year old have in common with the 10 year old and the 100 year old? What does the employed, unemployed, retired and too young to be employed have in common? What does that millionaire have in common with the thousand-aire (or hundred-aire... or negative net-worther)? What does the Hispanic person have in common with the blacks, and the whites, and the Asians? What does the PhD graduate have in common with the high school dropout?

Guilt. Regret. Moral failure. Mistakes. Embarrassments. I have never met anyone, ever, that would say, "Yeah, I really think I'm doing everything right. If I had to do my whole life over, I can't think of a single thing I'd do differently... I made all good choices. My most embarrassing moment? Don't have one. Have I ever disappointed others? Myself? Never!" People don't say those things. Such people don't exist.

We so we have this in common and it's a huge problem. How do we fix it? We can't. We're the ones who broke it, and we just keep making the problem worse. What we need is someone to rescue us. We need a right relationship with God restored. We need to be saved.

So I have for you today, some Good News. Did you know that's what the word "Gospel" means. You hear the word all the time, and it's one of those churchy words. But it has a simple

meaning: Good news. God has some Good News for you today, and it's summed up in one the most famous passages of the Bible: John 3:16.

"John" means it's found in the Gospel or Good News account that John wrote. John was one of the followers of Jesus. In fact, he was one of the closest friends of Jesus. So close, John was the one asked to take care of his mother. There's friends, and then there's FRIENDS. John was one of the "inner three" that got to be with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. John was there at the Garden of Gethsemane. John got to see it all!

John was the only disciple to live to be an old man. Imagine how popular he was. To sit down with John and ask him questions about Jesus! So he wrote it all down. He wrote an account of Jesus's life. (My best guess was that he wrote it in the mid-60's A.D. So about 35 years after the resurrection of Jesus.) It's an account with a lot of details about the life of Jesus not included in the other gospels. Christians received his written account with joy. So they copy it and distribute it. And they copy it and copy it. And it became part of our New Testament.

In this case, the context really doesn't add much insight or perspective on the verse, so I'm not going to go in to that. Read the whole chapter later if you want the context. In John 3:16 we have recorded what is perhaps the most famous verse of the Bible.

John 3:16 "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."

For God so loved the world. He did what in-love people do. He gave. God loved. God gave. How did this sound to the original audience that heard these word 2000 years ago? It would have been shocking news. You see the common understanding of gods back then is that they did not love and they did not give. The gods played... and humans paid. They had power and they had fun... and it was at human expense. And if you wanted the gods to be good to you then you paid. You sacrificed. You gave something to them so that they just might show favor to you. So to hear these words, "God so loved the world that he gave" was something totally different. Something weird. Something shocking. It was "Good News." This is what "Gospel" means! Good news.

When you hear the term, "Good News", you don't think of what you have to do, or sacrifice, or give up, do you?

- Good news! It's time to make your next car payment.
- Good news! No bonus this month, but you will be required to put in more overtime.
- Good news! We're going to do our spring cleaning today, and everyone's going to have to pitch in and work hard.
- Good News! If you work hard, do enough, repent enough, pray enough, say enough kind words, stop doing bad things, help enough people, and smile a lot, God might decide to favor you.

None of those statements are "good news" are they? But what John says is different. It is good news.

God *loved* and so he gave. And when God decided to give, it was his one and only Son. He gave what was most valuable to him. And his Son, Jesus, came and gave what was most valuable to him... his own life. God gave. His Son gave... because he loved you.

Why did God give his Son? Why did his Son give his life? It was the only way. The only way to pay for your sin and your guilt. Our sin and our guilt. Remember how I said earlier that we all have something in common? We've all blown it when it comes to deserving God's love

and favor. We have all forfeited the right to see a smiling face from God. Think about it, and make it personal. Where did you blow it recently? When in recent history did you feel like a failure? Did you fail to show patience with someone? Fail to say a kind word? Fail to speak in someone's defense? Fail to correct someone engaging in self-destructive behavior? Fail to take care of yourself? Can you remember disappointing yourself? Not living up to a standard you set for yourself? Well if you didn't meet your own standard, how much more do you suppose you failed to meet God's standard?

GOSPEL: Seeing our hopeless condition. God loved and God gave. He gave his son. His son gave his life. The perfect life of Jesus Christ was offered for you failings. His life was given for your guilt. The perfect life of Jesus ended with him giving the perfect sacrifice on the cross. There he suffered, he bled and he died isolated from his heavenly Father instead of you. For you. To rescue you. He died so you could live. He was punished so are declared not-guilty! And the resurrection of Jesus is both the period and the exclamation point to prove his work was completed successfully.

But we're not to the end of the verse yet. So now we have the description of how this gift of God becomes yours personally. Now you enter: That "WHOEVER" believes in him will be saved." Whoever... anyone... you. Jew, Gentile, man, woman, rich, poor, red or yellow black or white, they are precious in his site. Whoever believes in him will not perish. The gift is offered to every person on the planet... that includes you!

Whoever *believes* in him. I want to explain the Greek word here. Are you aware of that? Our New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. Our English Bibles are translations of the original. The Greek word for believe is "Pisteuo". And actually it means pretty much the same as our English word "believe" or "trust." (We have those two words which are pretty synonymous, but Greek just has one word.) With the word trust we see it more clearly, don't we? We *wouldn't* say, "All you gotta do is *trust*." We would say, "Trust who? Trust what?" We need some context before we could determine if we "gotta trust" or not. So in Greek, believe means to have a reliance upon someone or something.

Now in most instances in Greek, "Pisteuo" is accompanied by the preposition "en". It which is like our preposition "in." Again, similar to us: I believe in love. I believe in Santa Claus. John could have said, "whoever believes in him shall not perish" and in English, it looks like that's what he did say! But in reality, he used the Greek preposition "eis" which has a different meaning. My Greek professor in seminary illustrated like this: "en" means to be "inside of, or in the sphere of." Like "in" a box. He would draw a circle and place an X inside of it. But "eis" means to enter into something or to move toward something. And for this one he drew a circle, drew an X outside of the circle, and then drew an arrow from the X into that that circle. "Eis" implies that motion toward or an entering into something. It is highly unusual in the Greek language to see "eis" with the word "believe". But since John chose that word, he is making a specific point. Whoever believes or trust or relies entering into the Lord Jesus Christ, is saved. When we trust in Jesus we enter into him. Before we believe, we are outside of him. Do you want to be saved and not perish? John says that if you believe entering into the Lord Jesus Christ, you will not perish. When you enter into a relationship with him... when you enter in and rely upon him solely and completely for his forgiveness... when you enter into him, trusting he was sent, he was given, he came... to live for you, to die for you, and to rise again... THEN you so not perish. You have eternal life. You receive what God has given.

So the passage goes like this God loved, God gave. You believe, you receive.

You receive... what? Not perish, but eternal life. Not end, but keep on going. Everyone wants to live forever. It's the golden grail. It's what everyone desires. Here's how: trust in Jesus and your life will never end. What is eternal life? Jesus both used the word and defines it. It doesn't mean "go to heaven."

John 17: Jesus' prayer on the night he was betrayed. "This is eternal life: that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life is a relationship. Knowledge of and relationship with God and his Son. Do you have that relationship? You have eternal life! You are in a relationship that will go on forever and ever. And here's how this eternal relationship works: God gives and you receive. Forever. God gives. You rely upon him. God gave. How do I receive. We believe entering into Jesus Christ and now we have this eternal relationship.

Now, whatever preconceptions you had about Christianity coming in today, I just want to ask you this: what I just described: That's bad news how? It's not, is it! This is the good news of Jesus Christ, that in spite of who you are and what you've done, in spite of the shameful things you have thought and said and done, that would make you turn beat red if someone stood up right now and announced to the church these things... God loved, and so he gave. And he gave what you could not ever work for, earn, or deserve... a not-guilty verdict for all your wrongs. This is what he offers to everyone. It becomes yours... you receive it by faith... that is by relying upon the Lord Jesus Christ, not self. By trusting he is who he said he was, and he did what he said he did. Rely upon him for your full and free salvation, and this amazing exchange takes place.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him you might become the righteousness of God.

Since this is hard to believe, John goes on and says it like this: (John 3:17-18) **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

Jesus didn't come to condemn the world. The world, apart from Jesus, stands condemned already. No one has met God's holy expectations. Jesus didn't have to come and say, "I hereby condemn you." Apart from him, they're already condemned. Jesus came to save the world. Save means simply, to rescue. His life, his death, his resurrection save the world. When a person relies upon that Good News, they are rescued from a guilty conscience, they are rescued from hopeless and meaningless way of life, they are rescued most importantly from an eternity isolated from God who is the source of all good. In Christ, we are saved, we are rescued, to have an eternal, close, joyful, peaceful relationship with the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Friends, it's that simple! So why do most have this impression that religion is so hard, so difficult, so complicated? Let me tell when religion gets complicated. Religion gets extremely complicated when you are trusting in, relying upon yourself to establish a right relationship with God. You feel the guilt, you know your failures, so you decide you will fix it. So you try and work, and counterbalance the bad, and do good things. And after it all, you really don't feel any better. You still somehow suspect that when you meet God one day at the pearly gates, he is

NOT going to say, “Wow, that was really awesome what you did. I am so impressed! And it TOTALLY made up for all that other stuff you did. Good job!” You just know he’s not going to say it! So you keep working and keep trying. Maybe you switch churches or switch systems, or... you give up all together because going to church just makes you feel more guilty. That’s complicated.

Trust Jesus. He did it all. 100%. Enter into Christ, and you are right with God. We like to keep it simple here at Good Shepherd. That’s why our vision statement is simply this: Connecting You To Christ. In Him, you are simply saved. Would you continue to join us in the coming weeks and months as we weekly gather here to rejoice together in this good news? Because God has called you and me into a relationship with himself in Christ, we now have a very special, close bond with each other, too. We truly are brothers and sisters in Christ. And when I don’t see my brothers and sisters, I miss them. I need you. You need me. We need each other. We are family. We are in an eternal relationship with God... and with each other! Can we get together and do this again next week? I can’t wait to see you. Because each of is... simply saved. Amen.