

Love the World, Hate the World

SCOTT HOEZEE

It may be the most famous verse in the Bible. Some people, in an attempt to witness, even unfurl large banners at football games and other public events, and on the banner, there is just one word and two numbers: John 3:16. If you pick up a Gideon Bible in a hotel, you may see John 3:16 on the inside covers of the Bible translated into dozens of different languages. For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. It is a great text, and yet, there are other verses in the Bible that tell believers that they should hate the world; flee the world; shun the world; but if God so loves the world, why cannot we? Or can we, in some sense, love and care for the world, too? This week in our *Groundwork* series on apparently contradictory texts, we will wonder about our proper attitude toward the world. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, on we go with this series on texts from the Bible – different parts of the Bible, that if you bring them together, you say, how do these fit? I think our first text – we already referred to it – maybe we just read from John 3.

DAVE BAST

Here is the famous one: ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever 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.

So, there it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There it is.

DAVE BAST

Sent into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is part of the story with Nicodemus. Sometimes we shear John 3:16 off from all context, but it does follow on – scholars sometimes debate whether this is still part of Jesus' words to Nicodemus that night when Nicodemus came by night to check Jesus out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the interesting thing is, if you look at the text really closely, in the Bible I was just reading from, the quotation marks end at verse 15, John 3:15; so, according to the editor's decision, that is how far Jesus was addressing Nicodemus. Now John takes over and this is his comment on it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that is an editorial decision, because there is nothing in the Greek text that says that is the end.

DAVE BAST

Right. And the point is – the bottom line is – either way, the words are from God; whether they are Jesus being quoted by John or John himself writing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The point being, where does salvation come from? Why is Jesus here as the incarnate Son of God? Because of love. God loved the world. But now, let's play John off against John; so that is the evangelist John in the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Show us the other side.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now let's go to John in his first letter. This is 1 John 2:15-17, where this same John writes:

¹⁵Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. ¹⁶For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes, the boasting about what they have and do, that comes not from the Father, but from the world. ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

So, God so loved the world... Do not love the world; hate it, in this verse. So, which is it?

DAVE BAST

Is the world lovable or hateful? Are we to reach out and embrace it, as God did in sending his Son into it? Or are we to turn from it, shun it, avoid it, flee from it as far and as fast as possible, have nothing to do with it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if God loves the world, why cannot we, or can we, or in what sense does God love the world? What is John talking about in John 3:16; and maybe just for this first segment, Dave, we can focus on John 3:16 and take that positive part first. We will wonder in the next segment about why are we urged to shun the world and to not love it, as we just saw in 1 John 2; but in this segment, maybe we can wonder a little bit about, what is that love of God that John 3:16 talks about; and maybe we just need to widen out the angle of our lens here a little bit to pull back and see also the bigger picture about, who is God? It is a key question, and as some folks know, one of the oldest heresies of the Church, actually, was taught by a man named Marcion, who said there seems to be a real big difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. The God of the New Testament loves the world; the God of the Old Testament seems to hate it and he is angry at it and he is always judging it and spewing forth judgment; so Marcion said, probably two different gods. The God who is the Father of Jesus in the New Testament cannot be the God who is zapping people and showing contempt in the Old Testament. So, that leads to a question; what is the core character of God? Is he angry and despising of the world, or is he loving of the world? What is his core character?

DAVE BAST

Right. Yes, Marcion was the original cut-and-paste guy, who wanted to take the parts of the Bible that he liked and get rid of the ones that he did not like, but the answer clearly is that God is love – to quote again from the same John we are looking at all through here from another passage from 1 John. So, God's fundamental characteristic is love. It is, in the Hebrew, *chesed*, his loving-kindness, his faithfulness, his covenant fidelity to those whom he chooses to love. He is love in and of itself; love that overflows simply because it is love. He does not love us because we are lovable; we are lovable because he loves us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is important to point out that this is not just a Christian sentiment, either. The Jewish community also understands the God of what we call the Old Testament; for them it is just scripture. But the Hebrew scriptures, the great Jewish scholar, Avraham Heschel, who thought a lot about this and wrote a lot about the prophets said, you can never read the Old Testament and conclude that God is an angry God. He is not like Zeus or some of these angry Greek gods that are always loosening lightning bolts because they are angry at their core; no, no, no. Avraham Heschel says the God of the Old Testament is a God of love and this God of love, consistently in the Bible, reveals that he loves his handiwork; He loves his creation. There is an ancient prayer, a *kolect*, that goes way, way back; an old prayer of the Church, a traditional prayer that begins with the line: Oh Lord, you hate nothing you have made.

DAVE BAST

Yes, amen. What a wonderful truth. In fact, we could even say, I think, and need to say that God's anger or his wrath, to use the Biblical word, which is real – we are not trying to say that does not exist – that to say God is love means he is all cuddly and touchy-feely...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is also the God of justice...

DAVE BAST

But his anger and wrath are actually a function of his love, and any of us who has loved knows what that is about, because it means that we have a passion and a zeal for the wellbeing of that which we love; and when God sees his world, for example, trashed, polluted, destroyed, creatures wantonly slaughtered, that is what arouses his anger or his wrath. It is a corollary of his fundamental character of love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is because he loves the creation; it is because he can still see his own divine image deep inside every single human being; even the ones who are so sinful and who are messing up his creation, he still is able to love us.

It is the great line – yet another one, a corollary to John 3:16 is the line from Paul in Romans 5:

⁸God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

We did not become loving all of a sudden. We were still sinners; and yet, Christ died for us because God is still, at core, love. Salvation comes from the love of God.

DAVE BAST

But then what about this other side of the thing from 1 John Chapter 2 about not loving the world or the things of the world? We are going to look at that next. Just to give you a little tip in advance, we need to probably wrestle with the definition of the word *world*; what exactly does that mean? That is where we will go in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where, in this series of bringing together texts that sometimes say opposite things, today, Dave, we have been thinking about the conjunction of John 3:16, God loved the world; or Romans 5, God demonstrated his love for us, that while we were yet sinners he saved us in Christ; we are juxtaposing that with what we read from 1 John 2 a little while ago, where John directly says in verse 15: Do not love the world. So, God loves the world enough to go to great lengths to save it, so why do some parts of the New Testament tell us that now we are believers we cannot love the world. What is that all about?

DAVE BAST

Let's focus on the meaning of the word *world*; because the same word can refer to different things, can't it? It can have even different connotations. We were hoping that maybe there were some vocabulary differences here between...

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the Greek...

DAVE BAST

Yes; but no, it is the same word all the way through. It is the basic New Testament word for world, *kosmos*, from which we get the term, *cosmos*, meaning the universe. But clearly, in John 3:16 when it says God loved the *kosmos* so much, it does mean, I think, to some degree, the universe, because that has been affected by sin, and he is going to redeem that, too, somehow; but it is primarily looking at the world of people because it goes on to say that whoever believes in him should not perish; so John 3:16 is really about God's love for people despite our fallenness, despite our sinfulness. We are connecting Romans 5:8 with John 3:16: While we were yet sinners, God loved us. That is an amazing thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, salvation clearly comes – our getting saved, God's sending Jesus – clearly comes from the love of God; no question about it. But, once God's Son has been sent into the world, then he begins to form a new community, and then there starts to be this difference between the Church and the world – world with now a more narrow definition – so, here is a beauty of a warning, also from James. We just read from 1 John 2: You must hate the world; but James, in Chapter 4:4 is even stronger, when James writes:
⁴You adulterous people; do you not know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

DAVE BAST

There it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In what sense is he using the word *world* there?

DAVE BAST

Here is your choice: You can be a friend of God or a friend of the world, but not both.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is stark...

DAVE BAST

They are mutually exclusive. All right, now let's ask in what sense is world being used here? Certainly not...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, it is that same word, *kosmos*,,

DAVE BAST

Yes; certainly not the creation. James is not saying: Well, you cannot go backpacking in the wilderness and enjoy the beauty of a pristine mountain lake because that means you hate God. No; and it is not saying people – Jesus said, love even your enemies – so clearly, that would make nonsense of the New Testament. It must be that for James and for 1 John 2, the term *world* has taken on some very, very sinister connotations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I was thinking about this the other day, and it occurred to me that even in English we could play with that word, *cosmos*, and see that there is another spin on *cosmos* that gets at this difference between the Church and the world in the sense that James and John in 1 John 2 are writing about.

It reminded me of the word *cosmopolitan*, right? *Cosmos* is at the core of it. *Cosmopolitan* somehow reminded me that there is a magazine called *Cosmopolitan*, so I actually went to the website when we were preparing for this program and, well, indeed, if you go to the *Cosmopolitan* magazine website, you are going to see some stuff on your computer screen that you probably do not want your co-workers to see, especially if you work in a seminary like I do, because it is all about sex, it is all about drinking, it is all about high fashion, it is all about cocktails, and celebrities, and especially celebrities who are engaged in some great scandals of the day, or whose marriages are falling apart. That is *cosmopolitan*; that is a part of the *cosmos* that I think James and John are talking about; that is the world in the sense of worldliness. Reveling in, and over-indulging in the things that actually break God's peace; that treat the world in a way God does not the world to be treated.

DAVE BAST

Yes, worldly means the whole sinful order set against God, or organized against God. It is the world of superficiality; of surface appearances. You mentioned celebrities; just think about Hollywood and what that stands for? We are presented all of these glittering images of beautiful people; and frankly, as we all know, you have to be beautiful; and they will make you look beautiful; and they will spend the money to be beautiful; but it is all superficial because underneath are all of these sad, sordid, unhappy people with a string of broken relationships and problems with substance abuse and eating disorders, and all the rest. That is the world in its true sense that we are warned against in scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what we should hate; that is what we should not become a friend of.

You know, Dave, you mentioned Hollywood. It has often struck me, especially in recent years, that celebrities – famous people who get caught doing some really terrible things; things that, if it happened to anybody I knew, their marriage would be over; their life would be over; their children would not talk to them; they would probably lose their jobs; and yet, in Hollywood, some of these people do these tawdry, terrible things, and then they go on Leno or Letterman or Conan O'Brien and they make jokes about it, and somehow, it seems to only enhance their career, that they got caught in the backseat of a car with a prostitute, like the actor Hugh Grant did years ago. It did not derail his career at all; he just went on and joked about it. That is the kind of carefree, over-indulgence that the New Testament says: That is not the Church. Now we can say that there is a difference between *cosmos* in that *cosmopolitan* sense, and the Church as God's new community that is out to change the world from that into what God intended at the beginning of the creation.

DAVE BAST

If you listen to John's warning very carefully in 1 John 2, he says do not love the world or the things of the world, and then he goes on to talk about the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life; kind of an unholy trio. It all has to do with these superficially glamorous aspects of the world and its culture that appeal to us. It appeals to our eyes; it appeals to our fallen nature; our sinful tendencies; and it wants to suck us in, and scripture is really, really clear in warning us against that because those things will draw us away from God and away from other people and genuine community with other people – real love – we all know that. We just fall victim, often, to the appearances and the lies of the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we know that God loves the world, and still loves the world, and in a sense, we are supposed to still love the world because it is worthy of saving; and yet, there is that sense of the world that we cannot possibly go along with. So, how do we put all of this together? What is our attitude toward the world that God loves and that, yet, we are also warned against? We will take up that question next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, as we conclude this particular program, we will take up what is one of the harder questions that we as Christians face, and that is, what are we supposed to think about this world in which we still live; we still rub shoulders with a lot of different people who are not sharing our faith, who do not share our values or lifestyle; so, what should be our attitude toward the world? Salvation came from God's love of the world. God still loves the world; he still loves people; he still sees his image deep in all people; and we are, too, to look for and see that image. We are not to hate people, even those who persecute us, as Jesus reminded us; but then, where are the boundary lines? How do we both join in the love of God for the world and take the warnings from James and 1 John 2 seriously that say: Hey, you get too close to that and you are on the other side.

DAVE BAST

Yes. This is not an easy question; and believe me, we are not going to solve this one today on this *Groundwork* program; but, if you know a little something about Church history, you know that Christians have taken different approaches to attempting a solution for how to deal with the world; and one extreme solution that goes back, even to the early Church, is to flee it; just get out of it altogether, including physically. Actually, very interestingly, as more and more people became Christians in the Roman Empire, more and more Christians struggled with the fact that – hey, wait a minute; we used to be a small, persecuted minority; then it was really easy; we were pure and we knew we were the Church – now it seems like there are all of these hangers-on. Maybe to really be Christians, we ought to go live in the desert or something, or get on top of a pole and sit there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Move into a cave...

Dave Bast: There was actually a whole craze in the fifth century of pole sitters, where people would climb up on pillars and just sit there for 20 or 30 years to show that they had renounced the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that continues today. We obviously have tremendous respect for and love for our Amish sisters and brothers, but there is that tendency to withdraw from the world, to stay away from the world; not even to use the outer trappings of its technology, in many cases. So, that is sometimes called aestheticism; and there is that tendency in Church history. Sometimes when a question is really hard, you know it is hard when you see how many different answers have been given in the history of the Church, and one answer was, complete withdrawal; an engagement with life that did not let it leave its fingerprints on you; you are in the world but you are not of the world; and so, you are just passing through.

I remember there was a novel by Mark Saltzman called *Lying Awake*, and it was set in a Carmelite convent, where the nuns lived in modern-day California; and it said that when the nuns would gather for dinner in the refectory – they would have dinner together – they would have lunch and breakfast as well, but any meal – conversation was forbidden because they did not want people to be enjoying their food and having fellowship, so they would only read scripture while they ate, but they were all supposed to look at this calvarium, this human skull that was on the table in front of the Mother Superior, and you were supposed to look at that skull while you were eating as a way to say, do not enjoy your food; do not be worldly; do not enjoy this; you are going to die anyway, so you have to be austere. There is that track of thought in Christian history, and up to this present day.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is one big drawback to it, and please do not get us wrong; we have the utmost respect for holy people, including monks and nuns and people who have chosen the monastic vocation; but, the problem is,

whenever you flee from the world, you do not really escape it because you take it with you. There is a bit of the world that lives inside each of our hearts; so anytime you form a new community you may be behind walls, but it is still – the world is there.

The further problem with it is that it can be too world-denying; a world that God created, and it still has much that is good about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you might inadvertently throw out some of the good with the bad. I think God does want us to enjoy the gifts of creation, including food and drink and conviviality and social times. So, some have gone the other way and said, well – there is a tradition in the Reformed tradition about *common grace*, saying there is still a lot of good in the world. There is a lot you can learn from movies and from novels and from television shows and documentaries and biographies. So, we harvest what is good. We see what God still loves; the vestiges of God's gifts; even in the work of unbelievers, and so we can engage the world safely and harvest some of its fruits and enjoy creation as God wants us to. But if there is a danger in the aesthetic withdrawing from the world to throw out some of the good, the danger of engaging the world is, how do you know when you have gone too far? What movies shouldn't you see if you are a Christian? Those are very, very hard questions.

DAVE BAST

We used to have a Christian subculture, Scott, and I know probably you and I both grew up in this. I am a little bit older than you, so maybe I had a bit more of it, but you came from a more conservative background, so maybe you had it, too. Sabbath keeping, there were things you just absolutely could not do on Sunday. You mentioned movies; for a long time, some of our churches just absolutely banned movies. Drinking was another thing; no use of alcohol. In some traditions, smoking was verboten. In others it was indulged in freely depending on how European you were. There could be a certain superficiality to all of that – even a legalism – where you kind of felt better than others because, no, we do not do that; we are Christians; we are not worldly like that. The great danger there is not only just making the rules, but the ignoring of deeper forms of worldliness. When the New Testament warns us about worldliness, it talks about things like gossip and slander and malicious speech and covetousness and greed; all of those things that are so deeply engrained in us, and we ignore them to our peril.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The bringing together of these contradictory texts on this *Groundwork* program, Dave – I think what it means is that we are reminded that, indeed, God is love and all of salvation came from love, but the world is such a fallen place; and therefore, still such a dangerous place, that it took no less than the death of God's own Son to save it; and that cross should call us every day to be thoughtful about how we engage the world. Let's take the warnings about being too friendly with the world seriously. Maybe we need a little more discernment than we sometimes have when it comes to movies and television. The cross of Jesus says that is what it took to save the world, and that calls for proper thoughtfulness on our part.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us.

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