

Introduction

We all die. I may make observations today that you don't believe or we can't agree on. However, we can all agree that at some point, we will all take our last breath and our life will end. We will die.

About 2 weeks ago, a pastor I admired – Tim Keller – died. Perhaps some of you have heard of him and know his work. Tim started a church in NYC. Yet, the impact of his ministry was felt globally. I grew up not far from NYC. I know NYC is a tough place to plant a church. Yet, Tim did and God was faithful. Tim had the special ability to deliver thoughtful Bible-based messages that connected with both my “head and heart” and his messages have helped me mature in faith. He understood the cultural context of NYC and loved the people. He also preached globally and loved the people of this world. Most of all, he loved the Lord his God and tried to love His neighbors as himself. He is missed.

Today's message is about the God that Tim loved. The God that so many others in Japan and around the world love. More importantly, this message focuses on God's great and sacrificial love for each of us. Built on the firm foundation of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today's scripture is John 3:16-18. Where appropriate, I will share relevant insights from Tim to support today's message. Also, I will structure today's message using 3 questions: **What, Why and How**. These questions serve as markers to help you follow the message.

Yet, before starting, let's begin with prayer.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for this day for which you have made. Thank you for each person here today – in church and online. For those that know you, may they hear and understand Your word and Your sacrificial love in a fresh way. For those who may not yet know you, may they be led by Your Holy Spirit to carefully consider the claims made. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

What is John 3:16-18? What does it mean?

John 3:16-18 are well-known Bible verses. I will read them now so please follow along in your Bible or on the screen - John 3:16 – 18:

“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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ 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.”

Let's now look at today's scripture verse by verse to better understand the message. As we examine these verses, I will make observations to help relate it to our Japan context.

Starting with the first half of v. 16:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...

Here we see that God clearly sacrificed much. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”. To give or sacrifice your one and only son, we would all agree, is a lot. For any of us who are parents or grew up in a loving family, children are very precious...that’s a lot to give.

In the second half of v. 16, we see that God’s sacrificial gift is great and the implications of this sacrificial love are even bigger than perhaps we initially thought. That is, God’s sacrificial love comes with a promise. God’s promise extends to our current existence now and into our life after death.

v.16 goes on to say...

16 ...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The bigger gift is God’s gift of eternal life for “whoever believes”. The “whoever believes” includes Japanese and non-Japanese people. This is the promise to believers. This is also an opportunity open to all people – current seekers and skeptics and everybody in between. That is, for those willing to consider and those honest enough to “doubt their doubts”, this promise is for you.

God’s great love and God’s great gift is at the heart of the gospel. Tim Keller puts it this way:

“The gospel is that I am so sinful that Jesus had to die for me, yet so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. I can’t feel superior to anyone, yet, I have nothing to prove to anyone.”

In other words, God’s gift is for everybody (all people) – the people of New York, the people who live in and around the great city of Osaka, all people – both inside and outside Japan.

Now, I’d like to try and place this text in our modern, Japanese cultural context. As a friend of Japan and a longer-term resident, I’d like to share a few cultural observations. From these observations, my hope is to show similarities between Japanese people and God’s word.

Observation #1 - Japanese people value and prioritize sacrificial love.

Pls. let me explain more. Different than many western, more individualistic cultures, like the US, Japan is a country that focuses more on collectivistic principles – such as deep care and concern for others – a sacrificial type of love for others. That is, within the Japanese context of daily life, Japanese often express themselves in a way that demonstrates their strong “other” orientation.

For example, “Oyako don”: Oyako-don is a popular Japanese dish consisting of a bowl of rice topped with chicken and egg simmered together. The name "oyako-don" translates to "parent and child bowl," symbolizing the sacrificial love of a parent for their child. It represents the willingness of a parent to provide sustenance and nourishment, even if it means sacrificing their own desires or needs.

Another example of self-sacrifice might be the concept of “Omoiyari”. Omoiyari emphasizes empathy, compassion, and consideration for others. It involves putting yourself in someone else's shoes and acting in a way that benefits them, even if it inconveniences you. It can be observed in various situations, such as giving up a seat on a crowded train for someone who needs it more or helping a stranger with directions, despite being in a hurry yourself.

While the level magnitude is different, John 3:16 illustrate God's love and predisposition toward sacrifice on behalf of others. God is giving up something important to Him, so that others can have something more important.

Now, let's consider v. 17.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

In v.17, we see God's strong desire to be in a deep personal relationship with each of us. In many ways, self-sacrificial love in its purest form is relational love. Typically, strong relationships are not built on a foundation of condemnation but on love and trust. Trust grows over time. So, enduring, long-term, high-quality relationships are built on sacrifice and trust between all participants.

In many aspects of daily life in Japan, we see the importance of trustworthy relationships. My second observation is:

Observation #2 – Japanese people value and prioritize trustworthy, long-term relationships.

For instance, in the workplace. when I first came to Japan, my senpai (senior) said to me something that was both simple and profound. His words have stayed with me for a long time. He said, David...

“People do business with people they like.”

For people to like you, they need to know you. For people to know and trust you, that takes time. Over the years, I've learned, that Japanese people do take a fair amount of time to get to know you. Often, they won't make an important decision or sign a contract quickly because they want to know if you and/or your organization is trustworthy. Especially, if something goes wrong, that you and/or your organization will be there to help fix it and solve the problem. To gain that trust, it takes time. Yet, if and when the trustworthy relationship is established, there is great potential for the relationship to endure. In other words, building on my senpai's observation, Japanese do business with people they like...and for a long time".

A business reporter from the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), observed that Japan *“has over 33,000 businesses at least a century old... and then asked, why are so many old companies in Japan”?*

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200211-why-are-so-many-old-companies-in-japan>

Part of the answer is that Japan values and prioritizes long lasting relationships. I believe the world can learn a lot from Japan. Enduring high quality relationships matter.

Outside of work, personal relationships matter in Japan. For example, caregiving for elderly family members.

In Japan, there is a strong cultural emphasis on filial piety and respect for the elderly. Many Japanese take on the responsibility of caring for their aging parents or grandparents at home, even if it requires significant personal sacrifices. This can involve providing physical care, emotional support, and dedicating a substantial amount of time and energy to ensure the well-being of their loved ones.

In sum, Japan in many ways is a network of long term relationships – inside and outside work. Most Japanese and even long-term residents of Japan would agree, relationships really matter in Japan.

My 3rd observation is a more general observation. In fact, it is based on 2 recent Google searches and not my personal experience. Before I share my Google search results, let me state the obvious: 1) I am not an expert on the religions of the world and 2) nor am I a Japan expert. Yet, I am curious about learning more about loving, enduring relationships. So, my hope is to humbly extend our thinking regarding sacrificial, loving relationships while also considering the religions of the world and the god(s) of Japan.

So, before we consider v. 18 in the next section, these were my Google search queries and results.

Google Search (Q&A) #1 “How many religions are there in the world?”

“According to some estimates, there are over 4,000 religions, faiths groups, and denominations that exist around the world today. Researchers and academics generally categorize the world's religions into five major groups: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism.” Jun 20, 2022*
<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/visualizing-religions-worldwide/>

Clearly, there are a lot of world religions. Even in Christianity, we have many types of variations. For example, some people call themselves Baptists. Others call themselves Presbyterians etc. Yet, while Bible-based doctrine is important to Christian believers, there are other things more important than the name of your denomination. In fact, these denominations are not in the Bible. Simply, God and God’s word does not play favorites among denominations and people. The Bible does, however, talk a lot about a sacrificial, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Again, relationships matter.

As for my 2nd Google search, I know Japan is known as the “Land of the Rising Sun”. I also know the Sun Goddess Amaterasu is considered one of Shinto’s most important kami, so I asked Google:

Google Search #2 (Q&A) - “How many gods are there in Japan?”

8 million

The word "Shinto", 神道 in Japanese, means the "way of the gods" and defines the existence of a myriad of gods. The quasi-infinite number of Shinto deities in Japan is sometimes estimated to 8 million. Jun 16, 2022 (<https://www.kanpai-japan.com/religion-and-spirituality-in-japan/>)

In sum, my 2nd observation helped establish relationships matter. Now, based on my Google searches, we can hopefully agree...that’s a lot of gods and that’s a lot of religions. And, makes me ask a few important questions:

“When there are so many religions of the world and gods, who should we follow and how can we satisfy 8 million gods?”

With this question in mind, this is my 3rd observation.

Observation #3 – Japanese people are clearly sacrificial and relational, they seem to value and prioritize sacrificial relationships more than any particular religion or millions of gods.

So, please hold onto this observation. I will talk more about it in relation to vs. 18 in the next section.
– why.

Why is John 3:16-18 important? Why should we care? Again...so what?

Given that there are thousands of religions and millions of gods, John 3:16 – 18 helps make clear what is most valuable and what is the highest priority for the living God. In fact, John 3:16-18 helps answer the question related to all the religions of the world and all the gods of Japan.

Specifically, based on earlier observations, John 3:16-18 is important because ____

1. *Japanese people seem to value and prioritize sacrificial love. **God does too.***

God values, prioritizes, and demonstrates sacrificial love in all that He says and does. God's love for us is deep and wide. He loved us so much that he sent his only son to die for our sins so that we may have eternal life. God relentlessly pursues us in love.

Romans 5:8 says, "**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**"

1 John 4:9-10 states, "**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**"

2. *Japanese people value and prioritize trustworthy, long-term relationships. **God does too.***

God values, prioritizes, and demonstrates that relationship is more important than religion. John 4:16 – 18 helps us see what God has done (not what we have done.)

Specifically, God's love is not about your performance. That is, God's love shows that salvation is not earned through your good works or religious rituals. The focus is not on you and what you have done but on what He has done through Jesus Christ.

Moreover, God's love is revealed to us by His "other-orientation" - His sacrifice, His compassion and His forgiveness. God's word emphasizes that salvation is available to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ and accepts him as their savior. It is a free gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

*#3 Observation – Japanese people seem to value and prioritize sacrificial "other-oriented" relationships – more than any particular religion or millions of gods. **God does too.***

Let's more closely consider v. 18.

18 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.

In this verse, God wants us to know and understand the important and big difference between exclusivity vs. exclusionary. Let me explain as we conclude the "why" part of today's message.

Broadly, John 3:16-18 speaks to the heart of the Christian faith. In this passage, Jesus explains that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. This verse emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus as the only way to eternal life with God. Many people today believe that all religions are equally valid and that there are many paths to God. However, Jesus himself says that a relationship with Him is the only way to God and John 3:16-18 helps make it clear that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Specifically, embedded in this claim is that this exclusivity is not meant to be exclusionary. Rather, it is an invitation to all people to come to Jesus and receive salvation. It is not about religion but the pathway to a long term, enduring relationship with the true and living God.

As for traditional religion, Tim Keller puts it this way,

“Traditional religion says ‘I give God a good moral record, so he {god or gods} has to bless me. ‘ The gospels says, ‘God gives me a good moral record through Christ, so I want to bless him.’ ...Religion says ‘If I obey, then God will love and accept me.’ The gospel says, ‘God loves and accepts me, therefore I want to obey.’”

In sum, John 3:16-18 reminds us of the incredible love that God has for us – believers and unbelievers, Japanese and non-Japanese – through the gift of salvation that is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

Let’s finish today’s message by considering the “How” question.

How can we apply the message of John 3:16-18 to all our lives – believer and unbeliever?

Japanese and Non-Japanese

First, if you call yourself a Christian, it is important to share this message with others in a way that is both loving and effective. In our daily lives, this passage reminds us of the importance of our faith in Jesus. It calls us to live lives that reflect the love and grace that we have received from God. It also challenges us to share this message of love and hope with others, so that they too may experience the joy and peace that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Specifically, we can do this by showing others the love of Christ through our actions and words. Christian believers show love and grace through their actions and words by following the example of Jesus Christ.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

There are practical ways to show love and grace to everyone, even those who are difficult to love.

1. **Pray for them:** In **Matthew 5:44**, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Praying for difficult people can help us see them through God's eyes and soften our hearts towards them.

2. **Show kindness:** In **Ephesians 4:32**, we are instructed to be kind and compassionate towards one another.

³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Showing kindness, even in small ways, can make a big difference in someone's life.

3. **Forgive them:** In **Colossians 3:13**, we are told to forgive others just as the Lord forgave us.

13 “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Forgiveness can be difficult, but it is an essential part of showing love and grace.

4. **Speak truth in love:** In **Ephesians 4:15**, we are encouraged to **“instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”**

Therefore, we should be honest with difficult people, but also do so in a respectful and loving way.

As Christians, our actions and words should reflect the love and grace that God has shown us. By doing so, we can be a light to others and show them the love of Christ.

How can unbelievers apply John 3:16-18 to their lives?

We are glad you are here. Depending upon where you are in your life – maybe you’re a seeker or a skeptic – these are a few suggestions for you as you explore or question Christianity.

Seekers

1. **Read the Bible:** A good place to start is the New Testament, especially the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). These provide accounts of Jesus' life, teachings, and ministry.
2. **Study Christian literature:** Explore books by Christian authors that offer insights into the faith. We have these books available at OIC if you would like to learn more.
3. **Attend church services:** Visit local churches to experience Christian worship, observe the community, and engage in discussions with believers.
4. **Talk to others:** Seek conversations with Christians or pastors who can answer questions, address doubts, and provide guidance on your spiritual journey.
5. **Reflect and meditate:** Take time to contemplate the teachings of Jesus and their implications for your life, considering the moral, philosophical, and spiritual aspects.

Skeptics

1. **Conduct research:** Investigate historical and scholarly works on the life of Jesus, the origins of Christianity, and the reliability of biblical texts to gain a more comprehensive understanding.
2. **Think critically:** Analyze the claims, doctrines, and arguments put forth by Christianity, scrutinizing them using rational thinking, logic, and evidence-based evaluation.
3. **Explore alternative perspectives:** Study other religious traditions, philosophical viewpoints, and worldviews to gain a broader context for comparison and critical assessment.
4. **Talk with others:** Discuss with Christians who are knowledgeable in their faith, allowing for respectful and thoughtful exchange of ideas.
5. **Reflect on personal beliefs:** Take time to assess your own worldview, values, and principles, considering how Christianity aligns or conflicts with them.

For seekers and skeptics, I encourage you to approach your exploration of Christ with an open mind and a willingness to question, learn, and grow.

Conclusion and Prayer

I started this message with an obvious fact: We all die. I also mentioned that an individual pastor that I admire, Tim Keller, had died recently. Throughout today's message, I've tried to share that sacrificial, trustworthy relationships are both important to Japanese and Christian believers.

Before I close in prayer, I would like to share a father-son exchange between Tim Keller and his son Michael. This reportedly was the final exchange that Tim had with Michael before he died.

Tim's son Michael described his father's death and "going home" in this way...

Son (Michael Keller)

"Timothy J. Keller, husband, father, grandfather, mentor, friend, pastor, and scholar died this morning at home. Dad waited until he was alone with Mom. She kissed him on the forehead and he breathed his last breath. We take comfort in some of his last words..."

Father (Tim Keller)

"There is no downside for me leaving, not in the slightest."

Son (Michael)

"See you soon Dad"

--

We all die.

Can you say confidently like Tim Keller,

"There is no downside for me leaving, not in the slightest?"

Can you say confidently like Michael,

"See you soon Dad"?

--

Let us pray.

Dear Heavenly Father,

John 3:16-18 teaches us about Your great love for us and the sacrifice You made to save us from our sins. You created us and desire relationship with each of us.

For those of us who call ourselves believers, help us to better share this message with others in a way that is both loving and effective, showing them the love of Christ and emphasizing the grace and forgiveness that is available through faith in Jesus.

For those who are searching or skeptical, may they come to know that John 3:16 – 18 is one of the clearest expressions of Your love and grace towards them. May they continue to question and pursue You as You also pursue them with your love and grace.

In Jesus name.

Amen