

March 20, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Come to the Light

John 3:16 – 21

We saw last week in John 3:16 the love of God expressed in all its fullness. His love for the world, that is His love for the totality of fallen, sinful human beings is not only **providential**, giving life and breath and being to every man, but it is **yearning**, longing, calling out to whosoever will to believe and be saved. We see the kind of **love that is shared** among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the basis for the Father giving His Son to die for this world. In His prayer recorded in John 17, before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed: *'...and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.'* John 17:26 John 3:16 is grounded in the love that is shared between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact the invitation of the gospel is to participate in this divine love fest. It is also **conditional** – belief is the condition – *whoever believes in Him shall not perish*. And it is **elective** – you cannot divorce this text from the context in which Jesus tells Nicodemus that new birth happens by the will of the Spirit breathing new life into those whom He will. And so we see our believing in Him working with His choosing us to grant us eternal life.

And we saw the emphasis here is on God's yearning love – His longing as Peter tells us, for none to perish but for all to come to repentance. ***Come to the cross and you will be saved. Receive the message of the gospel and your sins will be forgiven, God's wrath will be removed, you will have eternal joy with him.*** And the emphasis contains a condition: If you believe. The gift of life eternal is free – but you must believe. Forgiveness of sins is guaranteed – but you must believe. The wrath of God is removed – but you must believe. Eternal joy is yours – but you must believe. John 3:16 goes out to all people of every ethnic and language group, and every age and every socio-economic category and, best of all, to every degree of sinner—from the bad to the worst. *"God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*

And then John links that statement in verse 16 with another '**For**' – giving us the reason for sending. *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* John 3:17 That is, in verse 16, Jesus is explaining the '**Why**' behind the story of the serpent on a pole in the wilderness – the '**Why**' behind God's provision for dying men – And the '**Why**' is: ***'For God so loved the world.' Jesus must die because God so loved the world.*** And then in verse 17 He says '**For**' – or, '**This is the reason God sent His Son into the world – not to judge it, but to save it.**

And here I think I need to say something about the word '**world**'. If you noticed it, that word is used four times here in two verses. 'God so loved the **world** – 'God did not send His Son into the **world**' – 'to judge the **world** – 'but that the **world** might be saved through Him'. And the question is, what does John mean when he uses the term 'world'. This is not only a legitimate question we need to ask of the text, but a very important one as well. Because as it turns out, John and the other New Testament writers use this word to mean very different things.

The word for **world** here is **kosmos** and it is used in at least several different ways throughout the New Testament. In Acts 17 for example kosmos is used to describe all of **creation**: *'...God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth...'* Acts 17:24 Heaven and earth here speak of all the created universe. Paul was clearly telling the Athenians about the God who made everything. But over in John 13, Jesus speaks about the **kosmos** as being just **the earth** itself: *'...Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world...'* John 13:1 Jesus is obviously talking about this material world or earth on which we live.

Jesus uses **kosmos** to describe **the present world-system** in John 12: *'Now judgment is upon this world ; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.'* John 12:31 And also in 1 John: *'We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.'* 1 John 5:19 **Kosmos** is used to describe **all of humanity, as in Romans 3**: *'Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.'* Romans 3:19 It wouldn't make sense that only some people would be accountable to God, so the writer must intend the use here to mean all people, everywhere in the world.

Kosmos is used as well to describe a **limited geographic area** as in the book of Acts when a prophet named Agabus stands up and declares that *'...there would certainly be a great famine all over the world.'* Acts 11:28 And we are not to suppose that he meant Palestine **and** all of Europe and North and South America and China and Australia and so on. As it happens, there was a famine in Palestine, and we understand from Scripture that other churches that were not affected by this local famine, sent support to help those in Jerusalem by the hand of Paul. It was also a limited use in Acts 17:6 when Jason and some of the other brothers were dragged before the authorities in Thessalonica and the charge against them was: *'These men who have upset the world have come here also...'* Acts 17:6 Now the gospel had not really even gotten out of the Mediterranean Sea area so we shouldn't think that world here meant that people in Tibet were upset with Paul.

And in several places, **kosmos** is used to **only** describe a **limited group of people** – for example, **unbelievers**: *'If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you...'* John 15:18 Clearly those who are Christ's would not, could not, hate Him or His people and so world here must refer only to those who do not belong to Christ. Or take Romans 3: *'The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?'* Romans 3:5-6 Again, **kosmos** here cannot mean everyone in the world simply because the Bible makes it plain that believers won't be judged. [And we will see that shortly later in our text this morning].

And then **kosmos** is used in a limited sense to describe the **world of those who are believers**. For example, in chapter one of this gospel we hear the testimony of John: *'The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* John 1:29 And so we must ask – 'Who is it here that constitutes the world'? Because if the sins of every person who ever lived or will live are taken away – what need is there for judgment in the end? Our sins are forgiven and taken away, only when we repent and believe in Christ. Otherwise they remain and we will be judged in the end. Or take the passage in chapter 6 where Jesus says: *'For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.'* John 6:33 Clearly the whole world of people in Jesus' day did not have life – Jesus called the Pharisees and other legalists 'white-washed tombs full of dead mens bones'. And not all in our day have life nor all those in the centuries before us. Life only happens when men turn to Christ to be born anew. So Jesus must be referring to the world of those who believe.

And then in chapter 12, Jesus says something remarkably similar to the text we are looking at this morning: *'If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.'* John 12:47 Jesus says two things here: those who believe are not judged and He didn't come for judgment but for salvation. And when you understand that those who believe do not fall under judgment – *'...there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...'* and you understand that not all are saved – then **world** here **cannot** mean everyone in the world is saved, but rather that Jesus came to save those the Father had already chosen in eternity past. That is, the **world** of all those whom God ordained should come to faith.

So with this understanding as the backdrop to verse 17: *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* John 3:17, we should understand that the Son's coming into the world **was for the specific purpose of saving those whom God had ordained to eternal life**. This concept is found in Acts 13 where Scripture records that when Paul and Barnabas had preached the gospel in Antioch that: *When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord ; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.* Acts 13:48 If we take the phrase – *but that the world might be saved through Him* – to mean that Christ came to save everyone in the world, we run the risk of having a Savior who cannot really save. I mean, He'd like to, but He is frustrated by sinful men who just simply will not believe. He is turned into some sort of possible savior.

Then our theology becomes man-centered and not God-centered, because we are the decisive factor in salvation, not God. But if you understand the Bible and how it talks about **kosmos** and how it unfolds the plan of salvation, you understand that the purpose of God to save for Himself a people out of every tribe and nation and language will never be frustrated by weak and frail men, or by all the demons and hosts of hell, or anything else in heaven or on earth or under the earth. If the God we worship, the God who is the Savior of the world has a purpose and a plan that are not accomplished, what would that say about Him? At the very least we would have a God that sits in the heavens wringing His hands and wondering at the outcome of His purpose. But that is not the God of the Bible. That God is too small.

Listen to what the Bible says about our God: *'For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?'* Isaiah 14:27 or over in chapter 43: *'Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?'* Isaiah 43:13 or look at chapter 46: *'For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'* Isaiah 46:9-10 or look at the book of Daniel *All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'* Daniel 4:35 This is the God of the Bible – sovereign, all-powerful, infinite and awesome – a God who plans and everything He plans comes to pass. **He is a God who plans and carries out His perfect will as He alone knows is best, over all that is in heaven and earth, and He does so without failure or defeat or fault.**

What that says to us is that the purpose of God in salvation cannot be thwarted or frustrated or limited in any way and the triumph of the gospel in the world is a sure and certain thing. That should give us incredible boldness in our witness. The fact that God is sovereign in salvation should make us the boldest risk-takers for the sake of the gospel on the face of the earth. If God has ordained that men are to be saved by the preaching of the gospel and He has determined that all those whom He has appointed to eternal life will be saved, then we should be those who spread the seed of the gospel without boundaries or limitations, or as one writer put it – preach promiscuously. And we should expect that Christ will save, because His word tells us He came to save the world. It is not wishful thinking, it is not mere hope that holds its breath with anxious worry – it is a sure and certain thing – God will triumph through the gospel in the world.

And now John turns to explain the condition of those who believe and those who do not. *"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* John 3:18 Contrary to popular psychology, humans are not born into this world as sort of blank slates, spiritually or morally neutral. **We are never neutral.** That is, we are never in a state where we are neutral with respect to God. Jesus didn't come into a neutral world where some neutral people moved from that state to become pro-Christ, and others moved to become anti-Christ. No one is neutral – all have sinned – all are guilty before God and under God's righteous wrath – before Christ all stand in the dock as accused and condemned criminals. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Romans 3:23 Jesus didn't come to move us from neutrality to the side of Christ – He came to make a way for guilty criminals to be found not guilty.

In theology, we speak of the inherent condition of every man, woman and child ever born on this planet as being altogether given over to sin. Sometimes we use the term, **'total depravity'** to describe this condition. **That is our default condition.** Total depravity however is somewhat misleading, in that the term implies that we are as bad as we can be – but we know in our hearts that is certainly not true. In every case of unregenerate men, there are depths of sin and rebellion that they have not yet plumbed, but given time and circumstances, we know we are capable of reaching any depth. No, total depravity does not mean that we are as bad as we can be, but that sin has affected us to the root and core of our being, to the extent that we are unable to love God or do what He demands, our motives are altogether sinful, and our rebellion and hostility toward God is complete.

Total depravity means that apart from any enabling grace from God, our hardness and rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sin, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total, and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting our condition to be this bad. If we think of ourselves as neutral or basically good or even less than totally at odds with God, **our grasp of the work of God in redemption will be defective.** But if we humble ourselves under this terrible truth of our total depravity, we will be overwhelmed by the goodness of God and be amazed by His grace and we will be able to see and savor the glory and wonder of the work of Christ on our behalf.

On the one hand, Jesus said that He did not come to judge the world but to save it – and yet here He clearly says that His coming brings judgment. And then you go over to chapter 9 and read: *For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.* John 9:39 And you ask yourself, 'Which is it – did He come for judgment or not?' If you just give this a superficial read you may conclude that Jesus is contradicting Himself. But if you dig deeper, you begin to realize something – Jesus did not come to judge those whom He was determined to save – He came to save them. Judgment does not belong to believers but unbelievers. But there is a sense in which His coming is a judgment on the state of things.

When the light of Christ bursts on the scene, there is automatically a kind of judging. It is a judgment that clearly defines what is righteous and what is unrighteous. **It is not final condemnation, but a judgment of what is.** The judgment is on those who do not believe – and that judgment is that they are already under the wrath of God and if they do not turn from their sin to the Savior, they will suffer the final condemnation of those who ultimately and finally reject the Son. I have heard too many people say that they can't stand being around Christians because they are so judgmental. And there are enough hypocritical pharisees in the church who think they have the spiritual gift of fault-finding that make that statement at least partially true. But most of the time, people in the darkness who are unwilling to come to the light, are simply uncomfortable around Christians, because the light of Christ within those Christians has penetrated their darkness and exposed their sin. **Jesus does not want to leave us feeling fine in our sin.**

A well-known professional golfer was playing in a tournament with President Gerald Ford, fellow pro Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. After the round was over, one of the other pros on the tour asked, "Hey, what was it like playing with the President and Billy Graham?" The pro said with disgust, "I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat!" With that he headed for the practice tee. His friend followed, and after the golfer had pounded out his fury on a bucket of golf balls, he asked, "Was Billy a little rough on you out there?" The pro sighed and said with embarrassment, "No, he didn't even mention religion." Astonishingly, Billy Graham had said nothing about God, Jesus, or religion, yet the pro stomped away after the game accusing Billy of trying to ram religion down his throat.

John goes on to explain this judgment in the following verses: *"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."* John 3:19-20 The explanation here is what happens when light comes. When light comes, everything lies open and exposed. Everywhere Jesus went, light shined and people were exposed for what they really were. The Pharisees and other religious people claimed to be God-loving, God-fearing people who were blameless with respect to righteousness. But everytime Jesus got near them they were exposed for what they were.

My oldest daughter had a really hard time keeping her room clean when she was growing up. There are two kinds of people in this world, cleanies and messies. She wasn't a cleanie. And when the light was off in her room, it might be considered to be clean and orderly. But if you went in and turned on the light, the mess it really was was revealed. People can claim a lot of things, but when the Light of the World shines on our lives, everything is exposed and the true state of things is revealed. This is what Jesus meant when He talked about judgment. **The judgment is that without Christ things are a mess and we are under condemnation.**

And the real truth is that people love the darkness, not the light. And if we put verse 17 together with this we see that the unbelief of verse 17 springs from loving darkness and hating light. People don't believe in Jesus, not because they are ignorant but because **they love darkness and they hate light. That is, they love the lie and hate the truth.** They prefer embracing a lie to embracing the truth. Sir Arthur Keith, a leading evolutionist in the earlier part of this past century once said: *"Evolution is unproved and unprovable. We believe it because the only alternative is special creation, and that is unthinkable"* Sir Arthur Keith It is only unthinkable if you prefer not knowing the truth – it is only unthinkable if you cannot submit yourself to the Lordship of Christ – it is only unthinkable if you fear the accountability that comes from the light of God shining on you – it is only unthinkable if you love the lie – it is only unthinkable if you will not believe.

When Christ comes, the truth about everything is illuminated. The truth about God. The truth about ourselves. The truth about sin. The truth about salvation. The truth about evil and the truth about all that is good. The truth about how we ought to live, and think and speak. **All right thinking, all right feeling, all right doing is measured by Jesus.** And so His coming here in this text is a kind of judgment – not the final judgment – but judgment that says, **'Those without Christ stand condemned in His light as sinful rebels who despise God and worship self – whose deeds are evil and love darkness because they think it hides their sin and they hate the light because it exposes their wickedness – therefore they do not come to the light.'**

But this judgment is not just negative; it is also positive: *"But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."* John 3:21 The grammar here indicates that this describes an ongoing action: **'Whoever keeps on doing the truth (that is, act in accordance with the light) will always come to the light and not run away from it.'** And the reason he comes to the light and keeps coming, is so that it will be clear that his ongoing behavior – his practicing the truth – will be shown to be of God.

That is, he comes to the light, he keeps putting the truth into practice, he responds to the encouragement and correction of the word of God so that his practice conforms to the truth revealed in Christ. The difference between the believer and unbeliever is not so much that one hates the light and the other loves the light – though that is hugely important. It is not even the fact that one comes to Christ and the other will not – though that too is profoundly important. No, the real difference between the two is that the believer comes to the light with a profound sense of God-dependence – with the humility of mind that knows that any good thing he does is only possible because it is wrought in God – that it is only by the power of God. The call of the gospel is to come to the light. Come to the light, let the judging, exposing light of the glory of Christ illuminate all the dark corners of your life, and grant you new life. And keep coming to the light. Don't let any darkness take root in your soul and rob you of the life-giving light of Christ.

Our gracious Father God,

We confess that we have loved the darkness and shunned the light. Too often we would embrace the lie than live in the truth. Lead us to repentance and save us from despair. Do not let us feel fine in our sin but Holy Spirit shine Your light into all our dark corners and fill us with light. Search our hearts and expose the corruption of our hearts, the helplessness of our condition. May we see our sins as the nails that pierced Your hands and feet, the thorns that ripped Your brow, the spear that pierced Your side, so that we might run to You, cling to You, find our salvation in You. Oh Jesus, Light of the world, grant us the grace to come to the light, to keep coming to the light so that our souls would be finally transparent before You and we would with open faces behold and reflect the glory of God in the face of Christ. And may the knowledge of Your saving grace cause us to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.