

The Choice is Yours (John 3:16-21)

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Our passage for this morning contains perhaps the most famous verse in the entire Bible – Jn 3:16. It's found on just about everything: billboards, tattoos, coffee mugs, t-shirts, football players, you name it. A unique risk faces anyone who preaches this passage in an American church context. Many know these words backwards and forwards and are at risk of concluding they don't need to hear what I'm about to say. "I already know that one, pastor. Tell me something new."

Be careful what you wish for, friend. Acts 17:21, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." It's not a spiritual compliment and Jer 6:16 tells us why. "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" Jn 3:16 is ubiquitous for good reason. It marks out the ancient path of salvation, the good way that leads to life. As Martin Luther once said, it is the entire Bible in miniature.

If you're not a Christian, much of what you will hear me say today may be new. You need to pay attention. You need to listen carefully. But if you are already a follower of Jesus, remember this. You need these words just as much as our non-Christian friends. For the greatest need in your soul, friend, is not to hear a gospel you have never heard before, but rather to savor and appreciate anew the tremendous significance of the gospel you have already believed that you might continue to love Jesus, trust Jesus, and follow Jesus all the days of your life.

My job as a pastor (and what you should require from all who stand in this pulpit long after I am gone) is not to tell you something new. Rather, it is to remind you and delight with you in something old, in what is of first importance, the life-changing, sin-shattering, joy-sustaining, hope-securing, church-uniting, evil-overcoming, glory-revealing news of Jesus Christ and him crucified. That is the gospel, the good news, this church has been built on for over 30 years. May it always remain so.

For that reason, I am especially eager to preach this passage this morning. I am eager to preach it because my forgetful soul needs it and because it stands among the alps in John's gospel as a place where we get to see Jesus, God the Son incarnate, sent by the Father, in all his saving splendor. For here John confronts us with the immovable fact that **life is not found in sin we savor but in the Son God sent.**

Oh, that we might remember that tomorrow and Tuesday and every day until we gather to remind one another of it all over again. Life is not found in the sin we savor. Life is found in the Son God sent. John points us in that direction by explaining both the nature of God's invitation to life in Jesus and the reason for our resistance.

1) THE INVITATION OF THE GOSPEL IS SALVATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST (16-18)

V. 16 picks up on the heels of Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in Jn 3:1-15 about his need to be born again, for the Spirit of God to grant him the gift of faith in Jesus. The spiritual life we need is only possible if the Son of Man, one of Jesus' favorite self-designations, is "lifted up" or crucified (v. 14). Why? Because forgiveness is costly. Unless someone else pays the penalty for our sins we will have to pay it ourselves, and the wages of sin is death. That's exactly what Jesus did for us.

But why would he do that? Why does Jesus say the Son of Man "must" be lifted up? As disobedient sinners, none of us deserve for him to pay the price of our redemption. V. 16 gives us the answer in what appears to be the beginning of John's own reflection on Jesus' words. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."

The reason God the Father sent God the Son into the world to live for us and die for us is because he loved us. Now to many ears, that's a total commonplace. Of course God loves us. God loves everyone, doesn't he? Not in the Jewish mindset of the time. No one would have blinked if John said, "For God so loved his chosen people, Israel."

But to say, "For God so loved the world"? That was scandalous. It shattered the ethnic confines, it blew out the borders of their understanding of God's activity. The Father didn't send his Son just because he loved Israel. He sent his Son because he loved the world, sinful humanity united in native opposition to the rule and authority of God in our lives.

As J.C. Ryle says, "The love here spoken of is not that special love with which the Father regards His own elect, but that mighty pity and compassion with which He regards the whole race of mankind. Its object is not merely the little flock which He has given to Christ from all eternity, but the whole 'world' of sinners, without any exception. There is a deep sense in which God loves that world. All whom He has created He regards with pity and compassion."

Do you, friend? Or do you scorn the world, hate the world, and do your best to stay away from the world as much as possible? Praise God he doesn't follow suit, not then



and not now. It's not because the world is lovely. There's nothing beautiful about a world filled with sinners in the eyes of a holy God. We don't deserve his love. Nor is it because God was constrained by some external standard that required him to love us despite our enmity toward him. He is the standard, and in the absolute freedom and impenetrable mystery of his will, he chose to love us, to hold forth a gift of salvation and life to those who merit nothing but death.

The magnitude of his love is seen in the magnitude of his gift. Fueled by holy love, God gave us "his only Son," his most precious possession, the gift of himself. There is no greater proof of God's love for you than the incarnation of the Son. We say, "Lord, how can you love me when you haven't done x." To which the Father replies, "In Jesus, child, I have given you immeasurably more." The Father didn't send the Son because he had to. But once the eternal God chose in love to make a way for our redemption, there was no other option. No other Redeemer would suffice.

As the second Adam, Jesus came to obey for us. As the spotless Lamb of God, Jesus came to die for us. Why? "That whoever believes in him," whoever trusts in him, whoever relies on Jesus to deliver you from the judgment of God and give you the joy of relationship with God, will "not perish but have eternal life."

Listen carefully to me, friend. The great spiritual need in your life isn't how to become a better you. The great spiritual need in your life is deliverance from the wrath of God on account of your sin. None of us are good enough. None of us merit God's approval. We're all sinners. The good news of Christianity is that Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn us. In our sin, we already stand condemned. He came into the world to save us, which means we all have a choice to make. Will you trust Jesus or not?

V. 18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." What you believe about Jesus and how you respond to Jesus is not a morally neutral issue. It will either be the ground of your condemnation if you reject him or the ground of your salvation if you trust him. There is no third option.

There is no, "I'm not sure what to make of him but I guess we'll all find out one day." It sounds humble. It sounds intellectually honest. Maybe it even sounds wise! But it is not saving faith. It is a skepticism that fails to take Jesus at his word and trust him accordingly.

Remember, you're not dismissing a religious figure. You are rejecting God himself and on that basis you stand condemned, right here, right now, before the throne of his



majesty. Maybe you're in process, wrestling with what Jesus has to say. If so, you're in the right place! This room is filled with men and women who are eager to help. Just remember at the outset and every step along the way there are only two categories, either you believe in him or you don't.

Saving faith in Jesus isn't an openness to whatever he has to offer. It's wholehearted reliance. It's going all in. That's what John means by whoever "believes." Not whoever "believes" Jesus exists or whoever "believes" he has some good things to teach us. Whoever believes in him. Whoever entrusts themselves wholly and completely to him to deliver your soul from the death you deserve.

And if you've done that, Christian, then take heart! Right now, in this moment, and for the rest of your life, you are not condemned. The Judge of the Universe who knows all things and sees all things, before whom every heart is exposed and every thought revealed, in the eyes of the One whose opinion matters most, you are not guilty.

But Matthew, you don't know what I've done. You don't know how many times I've done it. I mean, if I were God, considering the depths of wickedness in my thoughts, my actions, my very nature, I would condemn myself. You're right about one thing, friend. He knows. But you've forgotten one little word, a very important word, a word which trumpets good news over the shattered wreckage of your soul. And that is the word, "whoever."

Whoever reminds you there are no exceptions to God's invitation. Whoever reminds you there are no distinctions in his promise. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter how many times you've stumbled and fallen, no matter how bad other people think you are or how bad you know you are, if you, my friend, believe in Jesus, if you trust in Jesus, God says you will not perish. J.C. Ryle, "Without faith there is no salvation; but through faith in Jesus, the vilest sinner may be saved."

How can it be so simple? Because the Father who loves you is that good, the sacrifice of the Son who died for you is that sufficient, and the Spirit who preserves the gift of faith in your soul is that strong. If any part of your salvation were left to you, God knows the whole enterprise would crumble and fall. And so he has, in Jesus, done it all, paid it all, accomplished it all, guaranteed it all that you, friend, "might be saved through him." The invitation of the gospel is salvation through faith in Christ.

The "eternal life" God promises all who believe in Jesus is immeasurably more than a life that never ends. It's the best life imaginable. It's life with Jesus. And John isn't just talking about enjoying his presence in heaven when we die, or the unspeakable

blessings of the new heavens and the new earth when he returns, resurrection bodies included. He's talking about the life we have in Christ here and now. The spiritual hope and help we experience in relationship with God right now, in the midst of all our troubles, is a taste of eternal life. Yet the fact God holds out to us in Jesus such an incredible invitation doesn't mean all will accept it. In fact, until the Spirit imparts the gift of saving faith to us, our hearts remain resistant to his call.

Have you ever received an invitation to a party or event you know you're supposed to attend but not one part of you wants to attend? You know what I'm talking about, right? It's the Evites you open and then leave in your inbox without responding, hoping for a good excuse to bow out. Friends, when it comes to the invitation of the gospel, we're not waiting for an excuse. We're born with one.

2) OUR RESISTANCE TO THE GOSPEL IS ROOTED IN OUR REFUSAL TO REPENT (19-21)

We can seize upon all manner of intellectual objections to Christianity. Why is there only one way to God? How could a good God allow so much suffering and evil in the world? Why do so many professing Christians live hypocritical lives? Those are good questions for which the Bible provides sound answers.

But ultimately, it isn't a query in the mind that presents the most formidable obstacle to the gospel. It's the affections of our heart, the things we love and cling to instead of Jesus, thinking they will satisfy our souls. Our resistance to the gospel isn't a mental problem, as if there's not enough evidence for Christ claims. It's a moral problem. We simply don't want to submit to his authority.

V. 19, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." We know from Jn 1:5 that "the light" in v. 19 is Jesus. So when Jesus came into the world, announcing the gospel of salvation through faith in his name, why didn't everyone come to him? Why didn't everyone believe him? It's the same reason people still don't believe Jesus today. We simply don't want to.

John makes an astute connection in these verses. He points out that our minds are not objective when it comes to evaluating spiritual truth. Something far more subjective is at work, influencing our minds, shaping what we decide is true or false. It's called the affections of your heart. What we decide is true is influenced by what we love. What we decide is false is influenced by what we hate. For example, if you love the praise of men,

you'll give way too much credence to your admirers and critics alike, buying into a false and distorted view of yourself.

Or let's say you love spending time with your friends more than anything else in the world. If they're all going to a movie but your parents say "no," claiming it's too violent, are you going to believe them? Of course not. You're immediately going to start arguing your parents are completely wrong about the movie and that it's not too violent at all. You haven't seen the movie, so you don't actually know. But that's irrelevant, because you want to spend time with your friends and will choose what is true about the movie accordingly.

V. 20 says the exact same dynamic is at work spiritually. Why do we refuse to believe Jesus, to "come to the light"? It's because we don't like Jesus, we hate the light. But why do we hate the light? Because we love the darkness. We love our sinful ways. We like doing life our own way. And deep inside, we know that coming to Jesus means agreeing with his assessment of the evil of our ways and submitting our will to his. In a word, it requires repentance.

Left to ourselves, we don't like that kind of exposure one bit. We don't want to give up the "evil works," the "wicked things" Jesus says we shouldn't do because they are the very things we want to do. We tell ourselves the reason we don't believe Jesus is because we don't think what he says is actually true or we're not completely convinced it's true. In reality, we don't believe Jesus because we don't like what he has to say. It's an assault on our pride, a threat to our autonomy. We hate that, so we refuse to believe him.

We don't believe him because we don't like him. And we don't like him because we love our sin more. If you love the darkness, you'll hate the light. And if you hate the light, you'll never come to the light. John's right. Our resistance to the gospel isn't rooted in a lack of evidence for the claims of Christianity. It's rooted in our unwillingness to repent. But it doesn't have to be that way, friend. V. 21, "But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

It's the opposite of v. 20, with one critical distinction. Doing what is true is the opposite of doing wicked things. Coming to the light is the opposite of hating and rejecting the light. But where the non-Christian in v. 20 refuses Jesus "lest his works should be exposed," the Christian in v. 21 doesn't believe Jesus so his works may be seen. He comes to the light (he believes Jesus) and does what is true (he follows Jesus) with the end result that everyone recognizes the transforming grace of God in his life.

V. 21 reminds us the alternative to wickedness isn't self-righteousness, it's humble obedience empowered by the gospel. Christian, there is only one explanation for why you came to Jesus in the first place. And there is only one explanation for why you're still trusting and following Jesus today. All of those works of faith are necessary, but they don't point to how great you are. They point to how faithful your Savior is. For every one of them, as John says in v. 21, has been "carried out in God," enabled by God, sustained by God. From first to last, you are a trophy of grace.

Remember that, Christian, lest having come to the light and begun to practice what is true, you pat yourself on the back for all the "wise choices" you've made. We are never at greater risk of falling from the spiritual heights we have attained than when we start thinking we ascended to them by our own willpower or scaled them by our own might. It doesn't matter what mountain you have climbed, brothers and sisters. The explanation for your growth and achievement isn't you. It's the Lord.

Ps 18:31–35, "For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?— the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand supported me, and your gentleness made me great."

May a foolish unwillingness to repent of your sinful ways not hold you back from receiving God's free invitation of salvation through faith in Christ, friend. And having received it, may you never give glory to anyone else but him for all that has been accomplished ever since that day.

CONCLUSION

Life isn't found in the sin we savor. It's found in the Son God sent. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Has it been told to you before? May it be told you again, and again, and again, until the Son returns and brings his people home.

It is the best news you could ever hear. It is the best story ever told. And if you're a new believer or a young believer, I'll let you in on a little secret. The longer you follow Jesus, the more amazing it becomes. Why should sinners like us ever receive a gift so precious? I doubt we will ever fully understand. To God be the glory. Great things he has done.

