

For God So Loved . . . John 3:16-21
Pastor Jason Van Bommel

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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. 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. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 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.” – John 3:16-21, ESV

Introduction: Who Said These Words? Does it Matter?

Last week, I said that this sermon would be the most controversial I had ever preached at Forest Hill. I will not tease you any longer by holding the controversy until the end of the message. Here it is: We really don’t know who originally said the words of today’s text, John 3:16-21. They are either words which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus during His conversation with him or they were written later by John and are inserted here as John’s commentary and reflection on Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. Personally, I am not convinced that these are the words of Jesus, and I believe that John wrote them.

You probably immediately have two questions:

1. Why don’t we know whether these are the words of John or Jesus?
2. What difference does this make?

First, to be brief: We don’t know whose words these are because the original Greek manuscripts have no punctuation. Technically, the manuscripts have no punctuation marks “or any other orthographical equivalents.” The ESV has these words in quotation marks as the words of Jesus. If you have a red-letter Bible, you’ll probably see these words in red and you might think: “Well, they’re in red, so obviously they’re the words of Jesus.” But that’s an editorial decision by the translators and publishers. Without punctuation or other clarification, we cannot know for sure whether Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus or John wrote them later.

What difference does it make? None, really. These are the words of God, whether they came through the mouth of Jesus or the pen of John. Yet it does make a difference in that it means that Jesus was less fully explicit in his conversation with Nicodemus. It also means that this paragraph serves as a transition from Nicodemus to John the Baptist’s return in verses 22-30. It also means that this paragraph, vv. 16-21, is parallel to the final paragraph in John 3, vv. 31-36, as John’s explicit Gospel explanations that frame this chapter.

So, why do I think verses 16-21 are John’s words and not Jesus’ words? Well, the simplest reason is that Jesus never talks like this anywhere else in the Bible. Jesus does not normally refer to God the Father as “God” in John’s Gospel, but as “the Father” or “my Father.” Jesus also doesn’t use the term “only Son” or “one and only Son” or “only begotten Son” to refer to Himself. He prefers the term Son of Man, but John uses the term “only Son” in John 1:14. So, overall, the language of verses 16-21 sounds more like John than Jesus. This has

become nearly the consensus view of Bible scholars and is reflected in the NIV and in the New English Translation (NET).

Regardless of who said it originally, this is the word of God, so let's dig into it together . . .

A. Why Did God Give His Son? (v. 16-17)

John 3:16 is rightly one of the most popular and memorized verses in the Bible. According to Bible Gateway, John 3:16 was the most popular verse on their site in 2016, which marks a bit of a comeback for John 3:16, as it had fallen out of the Top 5 and even the Top 10 of several "most popular" lists from YouVersion and others. John 3:16 is a brilliant summary of the Gospel, but still I do wish Christians would memorize John 3:16-18 together. I know it's longer, but it gives the full meaning of John 3:16 more clearly:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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.

Verse 16 tells us *why* God gave His only Son, what motivated Him. Verse 17 then clarifies what did not motivate God in sending His Son into the world, Verse 18 then wraps up this section by emphasizing the resulting difference between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not.

In Greek, the language of John 3:16 is very strong. We add the word "so" to try to reflect that – "**For God so loved the world . . .**" The Greek actually makes a double-emphasis strengthening both the intensity of God's love and the necessary causal connection between this love and the gift of God's Son. We could paraphrase to bring out those connections by saying "*For God loved the world so much that this is the reason why He gave His one and only Son . . .*"

The focus of the intensity of God's love is on the world. God loves the whole world, not just the people of Israel, not just His chosen people. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus had emphasized the truth that everyone needs to be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God – even a member of the Sanhedrin, even the teacher of Israel. The need of everyone for new birth in order to receive salvation is absolutely universal. Here, John emphasizes the other side of the salvation equation. Just as the need for new birth is universal, so also the love of God is worldwide.

But we do have to understand the context of John's Gospel in order to properly understand what is meant by "the world." Many of the Jewish people had misunderstood the nature of their calling and their relationship with the Lord. They thought God has chosen them out of all the nations of the earth because God loved them specially for their own sake. They were, in fact, called by God to be not just recipients of God's love but vessels of His love to carry His light to the world. God called Abraham so that through him and his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God called Israel to be a light to the nations, to shine the glory of God to the ends of the earth.

So "the world" in John 3:16 primarily means "all the nations of the world" and not just Israel. It doesn't necessarily mean every single individual person in the world. God's love is not restricted to Jewish people, but it extends to all kinds of people from all nations, tribes, tongues and peoples. It is also true that God loves

every single person in the world, but not all in the same way. Some people God loves as Creator as He shows His kindness to them through creation and providence. Jesus made this clear in Matthew 5:44-45:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

And yet the John 3:16 love of God is a different kind of love, not just a sun-and-rain-sending love, but a Son-of-God-sending and saving love. In the context, as we connect John 3:3-8 to John 3:16-18, we can see that only those who are born again by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit will be able to see the kingdom and to believe in King Jesus. These are the people God loves with an intense saving love that motivated Him to give His Son, to send Him into the world to save them.

As an analogy, God has given us the images of marriage and fatherhood to illustrate His love. God loves His own as a husband loves His bride and as a Father loves His own children. I love lots of people in this world, but I love my wife in a fundamentally different way. I love lots of children and enjoy spending time with children, but I love my own children in a different way.

God has such strong and faithful love for His own among every people group in the whole world that He was motivated by this love to give His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. We need to be careful not to mistakenly believe that God's strong love for His own somehow excludes people from salvation in Jesus. "Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." As John Calvin himself said, "Since no man is excluded from calling upon God the gate of salvation is open to all. There is nothing else to hinder us from entering, but our own unbelief."

To make sure we do not misunderstand this love that God has or the mission that Jesus came to fulfill, John goes on in verse 17 to clarify: "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*"

Jesus' mission was not a mission of condemnation but a mission of salvation. Jesus came to save the world and not to condemn the world. If a building is burning and people are trapped inside, unaware of the danger they're in, and I go inside and start bringing people out of danger, I am not the one who started the fire or who put people into danger. So also Jesus' coming into the world is not the source of condemnation but is our only hope for salvation. Now, His coming does become a judgment, as will be clear later in verse 19, but that judgment comes from the actions of people: "*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.*"

Verse 17 makes it clear that the world needed the salvation that Jesus and Jesus alone could bring to it.

B. Why Did the World Need the Son? (v. 18)

Verse 18 then expands on that need by contrasting the status of those who believe in Jesus with those who do not believe: "*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.*"

The world without Jesus stands under condemnation. He did not need to come into the world to bring condemnation because condemnation was already the natural state of the world without Jesus. Whoever

believes in Jesus escapes condemnation. As Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We were under condemnation, just like the rest of the world. But Jesus came to bring us out of condemnation and into salvation.

Why is the world under condemnation? Because we have rebelled against God and chosen sin and selfishness over faith, humility and obedience. This is what verses 19-20 make abundantly clear:

C. What is the Judgment? (vv. 19-20)

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. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

The word for judgment in verse 19 is *krisis*. This is the crisis – the deciding point, the dividing line, the event that brings a decisive move for better or worse: The light has come into the world. Now does light coming into the world bring darkness? No. It penetrates and pushes back the darkness. When light comes into a world of absolute darkness, now there is the option of coming into the light or scurrying further into the darkness. When the light comes on, the rats and roaches scatter for the shadows.

This is the judgment: People love darkness. In a world of only darkness, you have no choice, no option- You’re in the darkness whether you like it or not. But the coming of the light exposes those who love darkness as they flee the light and prefer the shadows. And why would they prefer the darkness? Because their works are evil. Because they do wicked things. They don’t want their evil works, their wicked things, exposed by the light.

Most people don’t think of their deeds as evil, of course. We think of evil as sinister, violent, plotting, malevolent. Most people would say, “Well, I just did the best I could.” But what does that mean? John uses two different words to describe people’s actions: The word for evil in verse 19 means bad or hurtful. These are things which are corrupt by nature and which harm others. The word translated “wicked things” in verse 20 is different; it means “worthless” or “of no account.” These are evil things that are bad because they’re worthless, useless, meaningless, empty, devoid of real value. Both the harmful things and the worthless things belong to the darkness. Both are condemned and exposed by the light.

If I hire you to do some work for me, you can go astray either by deliberately doing what you know you’re not supposed to be doing or by being just plain lazy, doing worthless work. The man who embezzles money from the company he works for and the man who never really works hard or does his best are both stealing from their employer. God is the Creator and Judge, and He has made us in His image and given us work to do in this world. We don’t need to be sinister, plotting deliberate evil in order to deserve condemnation. We could just waste every good gift He’s given us on worthless nonsense. Either way, we’re still in the darkness.

D. What is the Evidence of Salvation? (v. 21)

Verse 21 is a very carefully worded contrast to verses 19-20: “*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.*”

“Whoever does that is true” could also be translated “whoever practices truth.” The contrast to the works of darkness, harmful and worthless, is the truth. Truth is faithful to the standard set by God. But notice why the truth-doer comes into the light – “so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

The truth-doer wants it to be shown clearly to everyone that God is the reason why his works are different. The truth-doer’s works have been carried out in God. They are not his own works, done in his own strength. He comes to the light so that God may get the glory for the good things He has done. Whatever good or true thing we do, if it is really good or true, has been done in God. It is His work. He sets the standard. He gives the strength and grace to do it. If we know this, we will want the world to see the truth so they can give glory to God.

Conclusion: Are You in the Light? (1 John 1:5-10)

There really is just one simple, direct and absolutely vital question to ask as our conclusion: Are you in the light? In the Apostle’s John’s first letter, he spells out what it looks like to be in the light:

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” – 1 John 1:5-10

To be in the light is not to be sin-free. In fact, if we pretend to be sin-free, we are self-deceived and the truth is not in us. Rather, walking in the light means living life in fellowship with God and with one another and being cleansed from all sin by the blood of Jesus. It means that we walk by faith, we love one another, and we live as forgiven people. Not perfect, but perfectly forgiven. That means we’re honest about our weaknesses. That means we love each other for who we are, not for who we wish we would be. That means we give thanks to God, confess our sins quickly, extend and accept forgiveness readily, and love God deeply, knowing how much we have been forgiven.

So, are you in the light? Have the harmful and worthless deeds of your life been exposed by the grace of God and have you confessed them to Him for what they are, asking for His forgiveness? Are you honest with your brothers and sisters in Christ about your short-comings and weaknesses, or are you wearing a mask and hoping people will accept you on the basis of who you pretend to be?

Walking in the light is the only place of true freedom in the world. Hiding in the shadows is a temporary solution and a lie, because the light will expose everything eventually. Come to Jesus in faith and let’s walk in the light together in fellowship with God and one another as a church family. Then we will be able to sing from the heart about the marvelous grace of our loving Lord, for we will know its depths and strength as never before.