

John 3:16-21

Introduction

What are our “felt needs” this morning? That’s not necessarily a bad question. But then we need to ask ourselves: Is my ultimate “felt need” what God says that it ought to be? Have I come this morning with the “felt need” of hearing God’s Word and with humility and joy receiving that Word so that it does its work in me? May God bless us this morning in the hearing and the receiving of His Word.

I. John 3:16–17 — For in this way God loved the world: he even gave his only Son in order that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world in order that he might condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

When God sent His Son into the world, this was purely the expression of His love. There was no other “ulterior motive” or purpose. God sent His Son into this world on a mission of salvation – in order to save the world from sin and death and freely give to all who believe in Him eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world in order that He might save some and condemn others. God sent His Son into the world *not* to condemn the world, but *only* in order to save the world – which salvation we know He has certainly, and will certainly accomplish.

And yet in spite of Jesus’ coming into this world being an expression only of God’s loving purpose to save, there is in these verses a recognition that there are still those who will perish. We read, “in order that *everyone who believes in Him* should not perish...” So what about those who don’t believe? If Jesus did not come in order to condemn even those who don’t believe in Him—if His mission was entirely and only a mission to save—then can there really still be those who are condemned and perish? How does the reality of perishing fit with the loving purpose of God in sending His Son into the world? John goes on to write in verse eighteen:

II. John 3:18 — 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.

Jesus came into this world with the loving purpose solely to save. And yet it’s precisely *because* of the coming of Jesus into the world to save that we have now the ultimate and final ground of sinful man’s condemnation. It’s precisely *as a result of* the coming of Jesus into this world that there has now arisen the ultimate and final ground of sinful man’s perishing eternally. What does John say? “Whoever does not believe is condemned already, *because* he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” On the day of judgment, the *final* ground of condemnation will not be a list of all the ways that a person has broken God’s Law, but rather that ultimate sin and that ultimate guilt of refusing to believe in the name of the only Son of God – the one whom God sent into this world with the loving purpose solely of saving the world.

Notice that John doesn’t say, “because he has not believed in *Jesus*,” but rather, “because he has not believed *in the name of the only Son of God*.” The “elaborateness” of that expression is meant to bring out the perverseness and the culpability of this failure to believe. The “*name of*

the *only Son of God*” emphasizes the reality of who Jesus is – that He is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:2; cf. Jn. 1:1-4), and therefore when people do not believe on such a Person they are guilty of the ultimate sin (cf. Morris) – a sin that could never have been possible before Jesus came into this world in order to save the world. Jesus did not come into the world in order to condemn the world, but His coming into the world has nevertheless established and brought into being the final ground of condemnation.

The ultimate sin—the most wicked expression of human depravity—is failure to believe in the name of the only Son of God. What does this mean, then, for those who have never heard the name of the only Son of God? Will these still be condemned and perish? The Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter ten:

- Romans 10:14, 17 — How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

And in Romans chapter two:

- Romans 2:12 — For all who have sinned without the law [without special revelation] will also perish without the law.

On the one hand, if someone never hears the Gospel in this life, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for him than for those who did hear the Gospel and yet refused to believe (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21).

- John 15:24 (cf. 15:22) — If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.
- Matthew 10:11–15 (cf. 11:20-24) — If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

On the other hand, there is an assumption throughout these verses (vv. 16-21) that the ultimate ground of condemnation for everyone who will ever perish is, if not an actual failure to believe in the name of the only Son of God because one never heard, then that ingrained unwillingness to believe even if one would have heard. So we go on to read in verse nineteen:

III. John 3:19 — And this is the condemnation^{*}: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

^{*} Cf. KJV; NKJV; NIV. The word translated “condemned” in verse 18 is *krino*. This word is in itself a neutral word and may refer only to the act of “judging.” However, the context may require (as it does in v. 19) that we give to this word the definite negative sense of “condemn” (cf. Carson). Though there are other words that mean only to condemn (*katakrino*, Mat. 12:41-42; *katadikazo*, Mat. 12:7, 37), this does not mean that John uses *krino* in order to avoid the sense of “condemnation.” We see *katakrino* and *krino* used synonymously in John 8:10-11. Similarly, the word for “condemnation” here in verse 19 (*krisis*) is in itself a neutral word and may refer only to the reality or the process of judgment. This does not mean, however, that the word may never bear the negative sense of a judgment

We know that the light is Jesus. We read in chapter one:

- John 1:4–5, 9 — In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

So why don't people come to the light? Why don't people believe in Jesus – in the name of the only Son of God? John says that there's only, finally, one reason: Because their *works* are evil and therefore they *love* the darkness rather than the light. It's not an intellectual problem, but a heart problem. Not to believe in Jesus, who is the light of the world, *is* to *love* the darkness. Or we could say it like this: The only possible explanation for not believing in Jesus, who is the light of the world, is that one must be loving the darkness. Therefore, not to believe in Jesus is to be among those whose works are *all*, by definition and in their very nature, evil. Or we could say it like this: The only possible explanation for failure to believe in Jesus is that one's works must be evil. We read in verse twenty:

IV. John 3:20 — For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

Is this too “black and white” for us? The reality is that there's a certain dualism in John in the sense that there is only light *or* darkness – the light being wholly clean and pure, and the darkness being wholly evil. Therefore, we are all either defined by our love for the darkness and hatred of the light (because the darkness that we love is wholly opposed to the light) or else we must be defined by our love for the light—the light that has come into the world in Jesus—and our hatred of the darkness (because the light that we love is wholly opposed to the darkness. In other words, the dualism of light and darkness, leads to the dualism of only two possible loves, and therefore of only two kinds of people – those who have believed in the name of the only Son of God and those who have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

What does the light do? The light, as that which is wholly clean and pure, exposes and makes visible the true nature of our works. The light reveals the motives from which our works spring and the goals toward which our works are directed as well as the absolute purity and holiness by which those motives and goals, as well as the works themselves, are seen to be really and fully “evil.” But so long as we can stay hidden, as it were, in the darkness we can hide both from ourselves and from others the true nature of all our works. So long as we stay cloaked in the darkness, we can convince ourselves and others that our works are not truly evil—not truly deserving of condemnation. Therefore, the one whose works are evil will always refuse to come to the light lest the evil of those works be fully exposed and made visible. He will always refuse to come to the light because he loves the darkness. And it's precisely in this refusal to come to the light that the true evil of his works comes to its fullest and most ultimate expression. What could be more evil than refusing to come to the *light*? What could be more evil than refusing to believe in *the name of the one and only Son of God*?

of or unto condemnation (Jude 15; James 5:12). The context, here, seems to clearly demand this negative sense (contra Carson, Morris, etc.).

On the final day of judgment when even those who never heard the Gospel in this life stand before the one who is the light of the world, they will still refuse to believe in the name of the only Son of God. And how do we know this? Why is this? Because even then, as they stand before that one who is the light of the world, they will still love the darkness. Because even then, they will still hate the light that exposes and reveals the true nature of their works. Are you seeing in all of this the miraculous transformation that must be worked in us if we would ever truly come to the light and believe in the name of the only Son of God? We come now to behold precisely that miracle in verse twenty-one.

V. John 3:21 — But whoever does the truth comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

This is the only place in the Bible where we have this unusual reference to “doing the truth.” So why does John use this expression here? Notice how “doing *the truth*” here in verse 21 is the opposite of “doing *wicked things*” in verse 20. This helps us see that what we’re dealing with here is not a moralistic doing bad things or doing good things (the kind of “doing good” that many who love the darkness can still excel at), but rather the kind of “doing good” that is, in its very essence, a doing *of* the truth – a purposeful “living out” *of* the truth. And what is the truth, in John’s Gospel? We read in chapter one:

➤ John 1:14 — And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And in chapter fourteen:

➤ John 14:6 — Jesus said to [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

And in chapter fifteen:

➤ John 15:26 — When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

And then in chapter seventeen when Jesus prays to His Father:

➤ John 17:17 — Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

According to the Bible, the only works that are not ultimately evil are those works that are a doing of the truth, a purposeful “living out” *of* the truth that is *in Jesus*. And so we see that the only one who comes to the light is the one who does the truth, not so that he might be praised for his own works, but so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out *in God*. We can see right away from this that John isn’t saying that the only ones who come to the light are those who have some inherent good already in them. Those who do the truth are those whose eyes have been opened to the utter worthlessness of all their works outside of Christ. Those who do the truth are those whose works are carried out in God: those whose works are expressions of love to God and of faith in Jesus Christ; those whose works are carried out in the power of the

Holy Spirit and in true submission to the authority and Lordship of Christ. The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 2:10 — For we are his [**God's**] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which **God** prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

And then in Galatians:

- Galatians 2:20 — I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but **Christ** who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the **Son of God**, who loved me and gave himself for me.

And again in Galatians:

- Galatians 5:22–23 — The fruit of the **Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

If those who do the truth are those whose works are carried out in God, then can you see now how the *entire life* of one who has been “born from above” (cf. 3:3-8) can be characterized as a doing of the truth, while an unbeliever’s *entire life* (no matter how “morally” good it may be) can—and must—be characterized as a doing of wicked things? And so once again, we’re confronted with this fundamental “dualism” of only two possible options. There is only light *or* darkness – the light being wholly clean and pure, and the darkness being wholly evil. Therefore, we are all defined either by our love for the darkness and hatred of the light (because the darkness that we love is wholly opposed to the light) *or else* we must be defined by our love for the light—the light that has come into the world in Jesus—and our hatred of the darkness (because the light that we love is wholly opposed to that darkness. The dualism of light and darkness, leads to the dualism of only two possible ultimate or defining loves, and therefore of only two kinds of people: those who do wicked things and refuse to come to the light lest the true nature of their works should be exposed on the one hand, and on the other hand those who do the truth and therefore who do come to the light in order that it might be clearly seen that their works have been carried out in God.

The dualism of light and darkness leads to the dualism of only two possible loves, and therefore of only two kinds of people: those who have believed in the name of the only Son of God and those who have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. This, in the end, will be the final dividing line between all of humanity. Refusing to believe in the name of the only Son of God is, in itself, the most evil of all works. Refusing to come *to* the light is, in itself, the ultimate sin – the sin in which all other sin comes to its ultimate expression.

Conclusion

Why did God send His only Son into the world? He sent His only Son into the world *not* to condemn the world, but with the loving purpose solely of saving the world – a salvation that He will most certainly accomplish! And yet with the coming of this light into the world there has also come into existence the ultimate and final ground of a sinner’s condemnation. “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.” It is here that we see the absolute claims of Christ, who is the light of the world and the only Son of God, upon each one of us.

Have your eyes been opened to the utter worthlessness of all your works outside of Christ? Are you one who rejoices now to come to the light in order that it might be clearly seen that your works have been carried out in God – that your life is now a “living out” of the truth that is in Jesus? If so, then this reality ought to cause us all the more to confess and repent of our sins and bring forth much fruit for the glory of God whose workmanship we are, for the sake of Christ who lives within us, and in the power of the Spirit who alone enables all that is truly “good.”

If you have not yet believed in Jesus, will you believe in the name of the only Son of God today? Will you receive and rest upon Him alone for your salvation? The invitation is extended to everyone indiscriminately in this simple proclamation of the Gospel: “*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.”