

June 8, 2014
Community Baptist Church
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
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Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 3:17-21.

1. Compare or contrast the ideas of condemn and judge.
2. Why are unbelievers already condemned since no one has been to the Great White Throne judgment yet?
3. Jesus taught that everyone who does wicked things hates the light. What does that look like in ordinary life?
4. What does it look like when people who do what is true come to the light?

COME TO THE LIGHT, 'TIS SHINING FOR THEE
John 3:17-21

We sing this great invitation sometimes:

Come to the Light, 'tis shining for thee;
Sweetly the Light has dawned upon me.
Once I was blind, but now I can see;
The Light of the world is Jesus.

It is an invitation to do what we have done when we came to Christ for salvation. That is the right and good response to the invitation that Jesus gave to Nicodemus in verse sixteen. God loves the world so much that He gave the unique Son so that if people will believe in Him, they will receive eternal life.

Okay, that sounds great. But what if someone doesn't want to believe? We know folks like that, don't we? We know plenty of

people who don't want to come to the Light. They don't want to hear the Bible or read the Bible. They don't really want to get too caught up in this "Jesus thing." Why not?

It seems a bit sudden that right after Jesus gave the great invitation for eternal life, He explained that, in spite of this invitation, people will do wickedness, reject the light, and face eternal condemnation. How sad. It almost seems like that threat doesn't fit here. "Although many people think primarily of this Gospel in terms of the bright side of love, it has a dark side that is perhaps more threatening to the unbeliever than almost any other document in the New Testament except the Apocalypse. To overlook the dark side in John is to miss the full message of the Gospel." (Gerald Borchert, "John 1-11," *The New American Commentary*, Nashville: Broadman & Hollman Publishing, 1996, pp.184-185.)

God's love for the fallen creation shines most brightly against the backdrop of what that fallen creation deserves. Jesus Christ did not come to earth to condemn the failed creation. But that does not imply that God has canceled the feared condemnation. Rather, today is the day of salvation. Now is the time to be saved. That is the message we must embrace and retell.

God's Plan to Save (vv.17-18).

God sent the Son in order to save (v.17). That also means that God did not send Christ to condemn the world. Those were Jesus' words to Nicodemus. *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world (v.17a)*. This statement follows the wonderful promise of eternal life. Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, the wonder of the new birth. Unfortunately, that a sinner could be reconciled with his Creator through the miracle of the new birth was not even on the teacher's radar. Therefore, Jesus explained that the new birth occurs when a sinner believes what God said about the person and work of the one and only unique God the Son. He taught us that God loves His creation so much that He gave the unique Son so that if anyone will believe Him, that person will receive the gift of everlasting life. That is what God did for us sinners. That is why He gave the Son.

It only follows then that since God gave Christ to open the door for eternal life, God did not send Christ into the world for the purpose of condemning God's creation. It is all a matter of God sending. If God doesn't send the means for salvation, we are most hopeless. God sent the Son just like God sent John the Baptist to foretell the coming of the Son. In that case, we know that John was born according to the promise and will of God. John was, of course, born in normal circumstances like any other child would be born. However, God's eternal intent for John was unique. God's plan was to send John with His own authority to prepare the way for Christ.

Now we have the same word employed to describe God's sending of Christ into the world. In a way similar to how He sent John, God sent the Christ in a unique way for a unique mission. However, that is where the similarities cease because God the Son was eternally equal with God the Father. The Triune Godhead agreed in the sending of the Son *into the world*. The Son came from the eternal presence of the Father into the temporal, passing world. John never knew any existence other than this world. Therefore, the Christ, the Son, came into the world with the divine authority as the representative of the Trinity.

A common understanding of Messiah's mission, and a hope for the Jews living under Roman rule, was that when Messiah came He would judge all the pagan authorities who caused trouble for Israel. That wasn't God's plan. Jesus Himself refuted that erroneous view. He taught, "*If anyone hears my words 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). He said, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*" (Luke 5:31-32).

Christ did not come to condemn . . . yet. The word translated *condemn* means to sift through the evidence and render a verdict. But the word also includes the idea of handing the guilty party over for punishment. The day is coming when that is precisely what God will do regarding the guilty sinner. Jesus also taught that *the Father has committed the time for judging to the Son* (John 5:22). Paul taught that God has already *appointed the day when He will judge the world through the Son* (Acts 17:31). He also taught that in that day, *God the*

Son will bring to light the hidden things and judge the secrets of every person (Romans 2:16). *He will raise the dead to life so that He can judge the living and the dead* (2 Timothy 4:1).

Therefore, regarding that last day, that time of condemnation, Jesus revealed the scene to John who recorded, *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done* (Revelation 20:12-13).

That day is coming. But today is the day for salvation, not condemnation. It is the day Paul described, *For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

God sent Christ to save the world through Him. He did not send Christ to condemn the world, *but in order that the world might be saved through Him* (v.17b). This simple promise reminds us that everyone in the world needs to be saved. The passive voice verb reveals that it is impossible for the sinner to save himself/herself. Every single person in the world exists in the default condition of heading toward eternal condemnation. God sent the Son so that the people of the world can be saved. The word means to deliver from danger or worse.

Maybe you have heard a person from the old school ask a sinner if he is "saved." I've asked that question before. We have learned in the meantime that this is not a good question for creating an opportunity to present the gospel because it is confusing. But is that really the case? Almost without exception, a sinner's reply to that question is going to be, "Saved from what?" Does that question reveal confusion? Is it not obvious that almost everyone who speaks the English language recognizes that the need to be saved is to be delivered *from* something? Delivery from something is the good news of the gospel! That Christ has come into the world and provided, by His own sacrifice, the means to escape, to be delivered

from eternal condemnation is great news! Therefore, “Are you saved?” might be a good question after all.

Through Him is the only avenue for deliverance. You will notice that all throughout our facilities we have lighted “Exit” signs. The fire marshal is quite emphatic that all of those signs be in working order all the time. Why? They serve the purpose of marking the way of deliverance in case we have an emergency. Those signs tell you how to escape a disaster such as a fire that might consume you if you refuse to believe their message.

Jesus promised the disciples that He would come again and take His followers to live with Him. He told them that they knew the way to this “deliverance.” Thomas [typically] doubted and Jesus replied to him, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Every sinner is saved by escaping through the blood of Christ. No sinner can be saved who does not go through that door. Every person is born in the default mode of traveling the road toward eternal condemnation and, therefore, needing to be saved from that disastrous end. God sent the Son to provide the way of deliverance, if we will but believe Him. So how does that work?

Jesus taught Nicodemus that faith delivers from condemnation (v.18). He plainly said that the person who trusts Christ is not condemned. *Whoever believes in him is not condemned* (v.18a). What could be more simple? Just believe in Jesus and you get to go out the exit, escape eternal condemnation, and enjoy eternal life. But the concept of “believe” entails more than assent to facts. To believe in Him is to wholly trust that Jesus the man was God in the flesh, who lived perfectly under the law, died to pay the penalty for sin, and rose again. To believe in Him is to wholly trust that it was the penalty for your sins He bore on the cross. Therefore, to believe in Him is to be united with Him, related to Him, and wholly identified with Him.

To be identified with Christ is to take up and bear the shame of His suffering on the cross, knowing that He did it for you. *And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”* (Luke 9:23). Believing Christ is willingly associating with the shame of the cross knowing that this is the only exit from eternal disaster. The person who does that is not condemned for his or her sins—not now—not ever!

On the other hand, Jesus also taught quite plainly that the person who refuses to trust Christ is condemned by default. He told Nicodemus, *but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God* (v.18b). While it is true that Jesus did not come to earth to condemn, sinners are already condemned. Yes, the final judgment, at which Jesus Christ will consign unbelievers to eternal hell, is in the future. However, the person who does not believe in the person and work of Christ stands under that condemnation right now. Unless something changes, he or she is destined to the inevitable end.

Jesus spelled out this conclusion in very clear terms. When religious rulers accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, He taught them, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment*” (John 5:24-29). The people who heard Jesus speak this were without excuse. People who hear this gospel today are without excuse.

They are condemned because they do not believe in the name of the only Son of God. Full dependence on all that the name of the Son of God contains is required in order to escape condemnation. Intellectual assent to historical facts connected with a man named Jesus is not the same as believing in His name. Agreeing that Jesus was a good teacher and even knowledge of assent to His doctrine is not the same as believing Him.

To believe in the name of Christ requires certain conclusions. If you believe in the name of Christ, you must fully trust that Jesus the man was who He said He was—God in the flesh. You fully trust that because He was God, He came to be a man specifically to offer the sacrifice of Himself to pay for sin. You must fully trust God’s assessment of yourself that because you have broken God’s law

repeatedly, you are in great need of Christ's sacrifice for sin. You must fully trust God's promise that if you lean wholly on the finished work of Christ to save you from the penalty of your sin, you will escape eternal condemnation. Very few people actually do these things—with the result that most people are already condemned because of their unbelief. They might be extremely religious, but they are condemned. They might be very devout, but they are condemned. They might be the kindest, most generous, easy-going person you know, but they are condemned already.

God's Judgment (vv.19-21).

How can a God who loves the world so much justifiably condemn people who do not believe in Jesus' name? God's judgment is just because He sent the Light (v.19). The Light has come into the world. Jesus warned Nicodemus, "*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world*" (v.19a). It is not that one day truth will appear and we will all get it. The Light has already come into the world. John has made that truth abundantly clear in this Gospel account. He wrote, *In God the Son was life and the life was the light of men (1:4). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (1:5). John came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him (1:7). The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world (1:9).*

The Light is Jesus Christ. At the same time, the light is the truth that Jesus Christ brought from God. Jesus Christ reveals that God is light. John wrote in his first letter, *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 (1 John 1:5).* Because God is light, we must conform to His standard or we will live in conflict with Him as opposed to living in fellowship with Him. *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6).* We are able to have fellowship only through our relationship with Jesus Christ—the Light. *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 (1 John 1:7).*

God's judgment rests on this reality. The truth, the light, is written down for all to read and know. Because God has graciously

revealed His own character, His truth, and the means for coming to and abiding in that truth, everyone is without excuse. God has every right to condemn everyone who rejects His truth. Our authorities have a general rule that says, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." In other words, if you are breaking the speed limit and an officer pulls you over to give you a ticket, he is not going to accept your argument that you didn't see any speed limit signs. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. God is more gracious than that. He reminds us over and over that He has revealed His truth in nature, in our conscience, and in the Bible. There is no ignorance of God's truth. So why don't people embrace it?

Furthermore, God is fully justified to condemn sinners because they prefer darkness. Even though God sent the Light, *people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil (v.19b).* How odd that people by nature love darkness rather than light. No, how common! This conflict between darkness and light is found throughout the Bible and especially in John. It goes all the way back to the beginning when God created light, which instantly blasted into the darkness and changed everything. Darkness is the character of sin and ignorance. It is the opposite of the light of God's truth that Jesus the Light of the World brought and manifested.

Darkness, therefore, is untruth. Light reveals that God is holy, darkness claims that there are many different kinds of gods. Light reveals that God's law is precise; darkness claims that there are a lot of laws throughout history that conflict. Light reveals that we are all sinners; darkness claims that sin is normal and light is archaic and restrictive. Light reveals that true happiness is found in dying to self and living for God; darkness claims that living for self brings happiness. Light reveals that judgment is coming; darkness claims that if there is a God and a judgment, God will be very kind about it.

People prefer untruth because their deeds are evil. It is not that truth is too difficult to understand. It is not that truth is intellectually deficient. The fact is that people who are at odds with God do not want to live near the light of truth. What a person does reveals what a person is.

People who desire to live contrary to God's righteousness do not come to the light because God's light exposes sin (v.20). Therefore, wicked people reject the light. Jesus taught, *For everyone*

who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light (v.20a). This statement clearly reveals that people who do wicked things hate the light. They might be very nice people, but, if they do wickedness, it proves that they hate Jesus Christ and the Bible. They might be very religious people, but, if they do wickedness, it proves they hate Jesus Christ and the Bible.

But how can nice people and religious people be guilty of wickedness? The word *wicked* can describe the horrible, vile sins we think of as “wickedness.” Such sins can be embraced in a person’s heart. However, while the Greek word *faulos* refers to evil, it more often speaks of the simple characteristic of being “good for nothing.” Therefore, the wicked person in this case does that which cannot work out for good eternally. That means that the word aptly describes every person who does not confess sin and embrace Christ for eternal life.

People like that do not come to the light of truth. That just stands to reason. A person who refuses to come to Christ will never accomplish works to His glory. Wicked people hate that which exposes truth, *lest his deeds should be exposed (v.20b).* The great aversion to the Bible is that the Bible exposes sin and shortcomings. People with sinful natures do not feel comfortable hearing the Bible, reading the Bible, studying the Bible, or seeing the Bible lived out by others. They don’t mind your moral lifestyle from a distance, but they aren’t going to “hang out” with you if you accurately represent the light.

Standing in vivid contrast to that reality of life is a greater reality. While God’s light exposes sin, God’s light also exposes works of truth. People who desire to do truth desire the light. *But whoever does what is true comes to the light (v.21a).* Believers try to do what is true. They know the truth because God has opened their understanding to it. They try to conform to the truth with the result that their works are characterized by Bible standards. Even when believers commit sin, they hate the sin and flee to the Bible. Instead of retracting back into the slavery of sin, the believer takes the sin to the standard of truth and identifies it for what it is. In this way, the light continually shapes the believer into God’s standard.

In the end, the work of truth-seekers glorifies God. We come to the light *so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been*

carried out in God (v.21b). God gave the standard of truth—the Bible. God drew the sinner to that standard, opened the sinner’s understanding, and the sinner confessed the truth. Now the redeemed sinner longs to live in such a way that his works reflect God’s glory. Faith in Jesus Christ is not affirmed by what a person thinks. It is affirmed by what a person does. If I don’t live it, I don’t believe it.

There is a tragic end for those who will not come to the Light of Christ. In the last days, this tendency for sinners to avoid truth will be so energized by Satan that nearly everyone will reject the truth of Jesus. Finally, because of the wholesale sin of humanity, God Himself will blind people’s eyes to the truth they chose to reject. Paul warned that *the coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).*

Let us plead with sinners while it is still light, while it is still daytime. Let us tell them again that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Let us remind them that eternal life is through Him alone by trusting in His person and finished work on the cross.