

John Series: For God So Loved the World

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Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So, this morning, I'm preaching on what is probably the most familiar passage in the entirety of the New Testament. No pressure, right?

I would approach this passage with fear and trembling, even if I had not just spent the week as a vacation Bible school worker. But, as I have spent the past week running on nothing but coffee, that makes it all the more challenging.

And I am still running on coffee, in case you were wondering. Some of you understand. I'm getting knowing looks from a few folks in the room. A few things about this short passage before we get started.

One, it's so familiar to us that we can be tempted to let it go in one ear and out the other. Oh yeah, I know that. I've heard that a million times. That would be a grave mistake.

[1:35] There is a great richness in this text that we might be tempted to overlook if we are thinking of it primarily in terms of having seen John 3.16 on a bumper sticker or tattooed on the arm of a pro athlete.

The next thing is that this passage is really kind of a closing commentary on what we read last week. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, in which, if you remember, we learned that we cannot enter the kingdom of God apart from regeneration or being born again, which is not the work of man and not mere moral improvement or even spiritual improvement, but is the powerful work of the Spirit giving us nothing less than a new nature.

So the themes of last week, the new birth, and especially the absolute necessity of trusting in Christ's atoning death on the cross as the only way to salvation, form the backdrop for what we read this week.

As John didn't see fit to include footnotes or quotation marks, we can't be sure if this passage is a quotation from Jesus or John's reflection on what Jesus had said in the prior verses, but in either case, that is okay.

The important thing to note is that it's clearly meant to expand on what we've already read immediately prior. Finally, going into our text, we need to be clear that as much as this familiar text is comforting, it's also quite challenging.

[3:09] It's challenging to understand, and some of what it says is hard to hear. There is amazing good news in this short passage, but there is also tough honesty here.

To get the most out of it, we need to approach this familiar text with receptive minds and with open hearts. As the text is somewhat difficult, we'll definitely be looking at it verse by verse to unwrap the meaning, then we'll look at the profound implications of what we read here for our own lives.

So please look with me in John chapter 3, starting at verse 16. We read this familiar verse. Well, that's great news, isn't it?

It's especially great news when we consider what John means by the world. Because John primarily speaks of the world in highly negative terms. Remember back to the prologue of John's gospel. The world described there is an unbelieving world that rejects the truth. This world that God loves so much is a fallen and broken world full of fallen, broken people who are in open rebellion against God.

[4:35] That is the kind of world that God loves. Imagine that. And the kind of people that God loves. And that's good because that is the kind of people that we all are.

Let's not make the mistake of thinking that God loves the world and loves us because we in the world are really, really lovable. If we were to think that, we would miss the point completely.

God's love is more striking when we consider the kind of people in the kind of world that God loves. And when we consider the way in which God loves the world.

It's nothing short of amazing to consider that to save people like us, God gave the nearest and dearest, most beloved thing.

His only son. His perfect, holy son for sinful people. What kind of love is that?

[5:35] Isn't that unimaginable? Can you imagine giving up what is most precious to you in order to save those who hate your guts? But God has done essentially that.

He gave his only son to die. Remember as we read last week, it is by being lifted up on the cross that Jesus saves those who believe in him.

By paying the debt for their sins. And God loved us when we were dead in sin by giving us his son to die the debt that we deserve in our place.

So that we can have eternal life and forgiveness of all our sins as a free gift through faith in Christ. God loved us when we were dead in sin by giving us his son.

That's the gospel that I believe. I remember it daily. I strive to preach it every week. And it still never ceases to amaze me.

[6:43] What about you? Verse 17 expands on God's purpose in giving his son. We read, 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.

So he came to a world that was already condemned because of sin, and he came to save those who were condemned from their condemnation. In other words, he came to rescue sinners.

Verse 18 goes on. 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.

Now, this verse is not quoted nearly as frequently as the previous two verses. To me, it's obvious why this might be the case. I mean, the good news is that those who believe in Christ go from being condemned to being not condemned.

But if we reject Christ, this verse is clear. Our condemnation is certain. That is less likely to find its way onto inspirational calendars.

[8:08] I take no joy in talking about it this morning, but this is what the Scriptures clearly say, and so we need to be clear about saying it too.

Notice in this verse, there are only two categories of people when we look at all of humanity, because that's what we're looking at. There are those who believe in Christ. Our text tells us they are not condemned.

Their sins are forgiven, and they will stand before God, but their sins forgiven when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead. And then there are those who do not believe.

And the text is clear. They are condemned already. And every one of us is in one of those two categories. We're about to move on to a couple of corresponding categories of people in our final two verses.

Those who remain in darkness and those who are in the light. Verses 19 and 20 talk about those who remain in darkness.

[9:14] This is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people love 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. What do we make of those couple of verses?

Why would those who do wicked things hate the light and not come to the light? The answer is actually pretty straightforward and obvious.

It is because coming to Christ exposes our sin. Think about it. First of all, we like to be the boss, don't we? Coming to Christ means acknowledging that he is Lord, that we are not, and that we are called to obey him, and he calls the shots.

In our fallen state, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, causing us to be born again, as we talked about last week, we simply will not give up the right to rule our own lives, even if it means that we are stuck in darkness.

[10:27] In addition to that, and this is big, acknowledging Christ, coming to the light, means acknowledging that we are sinners.

That's tough, isn't it? We like to think of ourselves as pretty decent people, and that might make sense if we're comparing ourselves to other people, maybe. If we think that God grades on a curve,

maybe we're okay.

But seeing the perfection of Christ, seeing it honestly, causes us to realize how greatly we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

You see, we cannot come to the light, we cannot come to Christ, without acknowledging that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Is there any wonder that we prefer the dark?

Come into the light. Come into the light, we'll expose our works. We will have to be honest with God and with ourselves that we have sinned and we have failed, and that we need the blood of Christ to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[11:41] What does being in the light look like? We read in verse 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.

Now, this verse can be a little puzzling for a number of reasons. What do we do with this? First of all, we need to be clear, this process isn't talking specifically about the process of conversion.

If it were, we would have to read it to say that really good people come to faith in Jesus because they're good and they want God to see how good they are. That is not what's going on.

No, there are really only two kinds of people, remember? There are those who used to be condemned and no longer are condemned, and there are those who are in darkness and who used to be in darkness but no longer are.

So people who are in darkness and people who used to be in darkness but no longer are because the Holy Spirit caused them to be born again and drew them to the cross of Christ.

[12:58] Verse 21 is also not saying that those who are in the light are perfect people who never mess up or that their good works are somehow the basis of their acceptance with God.

That would, after all, turn the gospel, which this passage has been so clear about, upside down. So, what can we say about those who come to the light?

They used to be in darkness, but they have been drawn into the light. They were condemned, but now they are forgiven through faith in God's only Son who was lifted up on the cross for their salvation, and finally, they are being transformed from the inside out by the work of the Holy Spirit and so their lives bring glory to the one who saved them.

That's what it means when verse 21 says that their works have been carried out in God. Now, the Christian, therefore, does not fear the light.

One, because our sins have been exposed and forgiven already, and two, the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. And we come to the light not because we want to demonstrate, hey, we're better than those people, you know, wanting to shine the spotlight and say, look at me, but because we praise and we thank God and we want to glorify Him for the forgiveness and the new life that we have in Jesus Christ.

[14:38] I think of what John Newton, who was a hero of mine, he wrote the hymn Amazing Grace and was also an Anglican priest, I think of what he said looking back on his life.

Newton said, I am not the man I ought to be. I am not the man I wish to be and I am not the man I hope to be. But by the grace of God, I am not the man I used to be.

I think that is the attitude of those who are in the light. Basically, again, there are two categories of people. Those who are in the darkness and in the light.

We need to keep that in mind when we think about what this text means for you and for me. The most obvious application from this morning's text is quite clear. The text talks about those who are in darkness and those who are in the light.

This text talks about those who are condemned and those who are not condemned. This text talks about those who trust in Christ and those who have rejected Christ.

[15:47] So according to our text, there are those who believe in Christ, whose sins are forgiven, who are in the light, and there are those who do not believe in Christ, whose sins are unforgiven, and who are in darkness.

And that is not an abstraction. We need to be clear about this. Every person hearing this message this morning either trusts in Christ and is therefore forgiven and is in the light, or does not trust in Christ and is therefore still in his or her sins.

And every person you know is either freely and fully forgiven in Christ or is still in their sins where they will perish if they remain in darkness.

Which one are you? If your trust is in Christ, there is no doubt you are not condemned.

Your sins have been nailed to the cross and they are no more. And now you are called to live in the light, to live a life that glorifies his name and the power of his spirit who lives in you and is changing you.

[17:03] But if we are not in Christ, if our faith is not in him, if we have not confessed our sins to God that we may be cleansed by his blood, then we are in darkness.

But we don't have to stay there. Remember, everyone who is now in the light used to be in the darkness. None of us started in the light.

And the way out of the darkness is faith in Jesus Christ, who is the light. As our text tells us, if we believe in him, we will not perish. Simple enough, isn't it?

So the question for each of us is simply this. Is my trust in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, and do I confess my sins and turn to Christ as my only hope?

And how we answer those questions is the difference between light and darkness and between life and death. And the world is still in darkness, brothers and sisters.

[18:18] Each one of us has friends, family members, co-workers, neighbors, neighbors, who do not know God's only Son, Jesus Christ. This message, that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

This message, you and I are called to share it with them. Have you been talking with them about Jesus? Your friends, neighbors, co-workers, family members who do not know the Lord.

If not, please, let's pray for the opportunity. Let's expect it. Let's take the opportunity when it comes.

When we get to the prayers of the people in a few minutes, take time to pray for those salvation.

Bring those people to mind that you might be the instrument that God uses to bring them to faith.

Pray for that. But we can't even stop there with just the people that we like and who like us.

Something that this text tells us clearly is that God loves his enemies, that God loved you and I when we were his enemies. This world that Jesus came to was a world that hated God and was in open rebellion.

[19:43] And guess what? Jesus still came. Friends in Christ, as followers of Jesus, we are called even to love those who are unloving to us. We are called to love those who are hostile to our faith.

We are called to pray for them. We are called to evangelize them. The persecuted church around the world is doing just that at this very moment. Do we realize that? They proclaim Jesus to the people who would love to kill them and who sometimes do.

Now, when I think about that, I can get incredibly angry at those who are persecuting our fellow believers. Then I remember I am called to pray for their salvation.

There is a long track record, after all, of those who hate Christians coming to faith in Jesus. I have no doubt it's going to happen again. In closing, what we see in this morning's passage at the end of the day is intensely personal for me and I hope that it's intensely personal for you too.

I used to be in darkness and I have been brought into the light. I used to be condemned and now I'm forgiven and it's all because of God's gift to me in Jesus Christ.

[21:02] Praise the Lord. So I say that my only hope in life my only hope when I face death will be this, that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[illegible]

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