

Sermon Series Four: Believe and Live
(The Gospel of John: Signs of the Messiah - 1:1-12:50)

John 3:16-21

Born Again? (Part 2)

If I were to ask you your favorite Bible verse, what would it be? If you were Martin Luther, you would answer “Romans 1:17 “The just shall live by faith.” If you were John Newton you would answer “Romans 5:20 “But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.” And if you were John Wesley you would say “Zechariah 3:2 “Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” But for millions of people it would be John 3:16. This is undoubtedly the best known and the most quoted verse in the Bible. And perhaps this is the case because this is the one verse that best answers the question, “How do I know that God loves me.” When I was young I came across a little card upon which someone had printed John 3:16. But it was arranged in sermonic fashion and read like this: “God (the greatest lover) so loved (the greatest degree) the world (the greatest company), that he gave (the greatest act) his only unique Son (the greatest gift), that whosoever (the greatest opportunity) believes (the greatest simplicity) in him (the greatest attraction) should not perish (the greatest promise), but (the greatest difference) have (the greatest certainty) everlasting life (the greatest possession).” This little card demonstrates the depth and power of this one verse - a verse that expresses the gospel message more clearly and beautifully than any other. As you can see, every word of it is significant. But it also begins a passage that in a beautiful way describes God’s love - the greatest love ever! Would you notice then the following four characteristics of God’s love:

I. God’s love is great

(“God so loved the world”)

1. It is immense!

It was Paul’s prayer that Christians would come to grasp more and more the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love - a love that surpasses the knowledge of the wisest and most intellectual of men and women (Ephesians 3:18-19). It is unfathomable, unexplainable almost unacceptable! The immensity of this love is described in a song that I often sang years ago. It went like this: (Verse 1) The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell, it goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair, bow down with care, God gave his Son to win: his erring child he reconciled, and pardoned from his sin. (Verse 2) Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made; were every stalk on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the

whole though stretched from sky to sky. Oh love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall for ever more endure the saints' and angel's song. God's love is infinite and you will never be in a place where you have stepped out of or passed beyond the boundaries of his love. Everywhere you walk you are surrounded by it - the air you breathe, the sunset you adore, the plants and animals that provide your food, the pets you enjoy, the materials for everything that you own, the relationships that bless you, the peace and joy founded on the surety of God's promises, the salvation that is yours, your talents and abilities and the abilities of those that surround you ...

2. It is without prejudice.

No Jewish writer specifically asserted that God loved all the peoples of the world. But John states clearly that God loves all people regardless of their race or nationality. It is equally important to him that people from every tongue and tribe and nation come to Christ. Far different than the love of mankind, God is not concerned about your economic status, your ethnicity, your education, your profession, your popularity, your position in society, your personality, your physical appearance, etc. God is not willing that any should perish! His love knows no boundaries including the boundary of bigotry and prejudice. His love is greater than that! But as we will see, his love is amazing not merely because the world is so big, but because it is so bad.

II. God's love is generous *"God so loved the world that he gave His only unique Son..."*

God gave the best he had to give. God stopped at nothing including sacrificing his own Son. Surely to see his son die in such a cruel fashion would break the heart of any Dad. How much more so then our Heavenly Father! And that Son was no ordinary son; he is profoundly unique. There is no one in all creation like him. There is no one who is his equal. There is no one else who is God in the flesh. For you see God gave God. God literally gave of his own self. And to give of oneself in such an extraordinary way is the greatest gift that anyone can give. So when God gave Jesus he gave the best gift in the universe. If he gave you a palatial mansion it would not be better! If he gave you land the size of the state of South Carolina, it would not be better! If he made you ruler of the entire world, it would not be better! There has never been, nor will there ever be, a gift like God's gift. Such extravagant generosity! God's love for you is intense!!

III. God's love is purposed

"...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."

This is not some sentimental or impulsive act on the part of God. It is not a knee jerk reaction to something that caught him off guard.

1. Jesus was a gift planned from before the foundation of the world.

God had always intended to give Jesus. The psalmist and Isaiah spoke of the crucifixion centuries before it took place. Before he even created us or set the universe in motion, he had already determined the incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In John 8:56 it says that “your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” Revelation 13:8 states clearly that before creation, and by grace alone, God chose individuals to be redeemed by Christ death. Ephesians 1:3 says that he chose us in him before the foundation of the world and then goes on to speak of the redemption that we would have through his blood and therefore the forgiveness of all of our trespasses (Ephesians 1:7-8).

2. Jesus was a gift planned for all who would believe.

This immediately raises the question as to what we mean by “believe.” What do we mean by “faith”? It must be important because John has used the word faith or believe eight times in this gospel already. In chapter 3 alone it will be used seven times.

1) To believe or have faith is not some pie in the sky imaginary thinking that is not related to truth or evidence. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is the absolute assurance and confidence, the settled conviction that something in the future which has been promised by God will actually come to pass because God will bring it about. It is not blind trust in the face of contrary evidence, not an unknowable leap into the dark. Biblical faith is a confident trust in the eternal God who is all-powerful, infinitely wise, and eternally trustworthy. He is the God who has revealed himself in his Word and in the person of Jesus Christ. He is a God whose promises have proven true from generation to generation and who will never leave or forsake his own.

2) To believe or have faith is primarily to believe three things. *First*, you recognize that you are a sinner who deserves to be separated from God forever. We are sinners and God must punish sin. It is realizing that you have no other backup. Good works, sincerity, personal sacrifices, being a little less sinful, trying harder, etc., will in no way place you in good standing before God. *Second*, it is realizing that Jesus Christ acted to remove that sin and wants to begin to make you perfect by conforming you to Christ’s image. *Third*, you must surrender your life to God and ask him to be your new boss. You must receive Christ as Savior and Lord. He is the Lord Jesus Christ! You begin your Christian life with the desire to be a fully devoted follower of Christ. To believe or have faith demands action. It is more than casual intellectual agreement. It is trusting your eternal destiny to the work of Christ. Authentic faith in Christ immediately leads to bearing the fruit of the Spirit. And although it will have its ups and downs, it is

ultimately a sustained faith. It is living a *life of faith* which grows stronger and better as we get to know God better.

3. Jesus came to save and not to condemn.

Even though judgment results from unbelief, condemnatory judgment was not the purpose of the incarnation. Christ came to provide salvation for everyone through his death on the cross.

IV. God's love is spurned.

“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. 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. 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.”

1. Many reject God's love.

The sad thing is that the overwhelming majority of people who lived throughout history have turned their back on God's revelation through nature, through conscience, through the nation of Israel, through the incarnation, and through the witness of the church. Not believing in the God-sent Son is tantamount to self-condemnation. God is not to blame, but rather the unbeliever. Humans remain responsible agents; no one is compelled to believe. Indeed unbelievers face the necessity of escaping an already existing condemnation. Belief in Jesus precludes judgment but unbelief means that one stands under a sentence of judgment.

2. Those that reject God's love stand condemned.

Why is man condemned in his present state? What is the case for the prosecution against men and women? *First* is the unbeliever's refusal to believe in the name of God's one and only Son. Jesus' name literally means “God saves!” When you reject Christ you reject the God who saves. You either shake your fist in the face of God or you decide that you will determine the means of salvation or the way to God. In this generation people become downright hostile to the notion that they are sinners in need of a Savior. As one woman said, “I can accept the rest (Christ was a good teacher, a strong moral example, etc.) but I cannot accept this business about my need of receiving Jesus Christ as personal Savior.” *Second* the unbelieving world stands condemned because they actually prefer sin. They hate the light (the Light of the World; the light of the gospel; the revelation of the sinfulness of their ungodly desires, actions, and motives; the demands of God's holy character). They love darkness and literally run from the light. Although this is becoming increasingly untrue, most people are ashamed to carry on evil activity in the light of day. They do the bulk of their business at night or in a corner. They seek the

cover of darkness to cloak their evil deeds. . *** They do not simply fall short of God's standards of perfection; the problem with sinners is that they do not aim or even desire to go in the right direction toward those standards. People offer many excuses for not accepting Christ. Some cite the presence of hypocrites in the church. Others claim inability to believe some of the truths about Christ or the gospel. Many say that they cannot accept the fact that God permits so much suffering in the world. These are merely attempts to conceal a heart in rebellion against God. The ultimate reason people do not come to Christ is that they do not want to.

Illustration: Dallas Willard writes about a 2-and-a-half-year-old girl in her backyard who one day discovered the secret to making mud (which she called "warm chocolate"). Her grandmother had been reading and was facing away from the action, but after cleaning up what was to her a mess, she told little Larissa not to make any more chocolate and turned her chair around so as to be facing her granddaughter. The little girl soon resumed her "warm chocolate" routine, with one request posed as sweetly as a 2-and-a-half-year-old can make it: "Don't look at me, Nana. Okay?" Nana (being a little co-dependent) of course agreed. Larissa continued to manufacture warm chocolate. Three times she said, as she continued her work, "Don't look at me, Nana. Okay? Thus the tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong." Any time we choose to do wrong or to withhold doing right, we choose hiddenness as well. It may be that out of all the prayers that are ever spoken, the most common one—the quietest one; the one that we least acknowledge making—is simply this: Don't look at me, God. It was the very first prayer spoken after the Fall. God came to walk in the garden, to be with the man and the woman, and called, "Where are you?" "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid," Adam answered, "so I hid." Don't look at me, God. Okay?

Conclusion

Much of contemporary man's problem with the gospel is anthropological. It arises from a faulty view of himself. Fallen man generally views human beings as neutral if not good. Therefore the fact that God sent Jesus, and Jesus came to save sinners, seems only interesting at best. If man is good he has no need of salvation, He can applaud God's love as admirable. If man is neutral (not really bad or good), he can take salvation or leave it. If he leaves it, God appears unfair for condemning him. However, man is not good or neutral—but bad! He *already* stands condemned and destined to experience God's wrath. Therefore faith in Jesus becomes a

necessary way of escape from that dreadful destiny. The Incarnation becomes a marvelous, extravagant expression of God's love and grace.

In contrast to unbelieving mankind, People who adhere to the truth, "come to the light" and its source, Jesus (the "Light"). They do not try to cover up worthless deeds, but they are willing to expose them to the searching light of God's revelation (cf. 1 John 1:8-9). Come shine on me, they cry! They also humbly acknowledge that the good works that they do are really God's production. *** They do all this, of course, because God draws them to Himself. The fundamental difference between believers and unbelievers is their attitude toward God's love demonstrated through giving to them the light of his truth.

Stephen Baldwin is one of the famous Baldwin brothers, a family of Hollywood actors. Referring to his newfound faith in Christ, Stephen said, "I've never been as excited or happy about where I am in my life. There's no one I know in Hollywood who can say that." Stephen's wife came to Christ in 2000 and announced to Stephen, "I'm going to be serving Jesus now." Baffled at her conversion, Stephen thought, "Who does this Jesus dude think he is coming around here?" The events of September 11 were pivotal in his change of mind as he realized that the impossible was possible. As Stephen describes it, "It made me say the Bible is true, and Jesus Christ could come back tomorrow." How has his life changed? Stephen's work as an actor "has largely dried up." He won't work in a film that includes adultery, violence, or profanity. He's traded his Porsche for a Chevy Malibu. Stephen spends his available time preaching the gospel. He directs and hosts a DVD project aimed at reaching young people through extreme sports. As for his marriage, Stephen and his wife are now "as one." Stephen truly is a new creation who daily walks in the light.