

### **John 3:14-21**

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

## **Does God Love the World?** - March 14, 2021

*John 3:14-21*

John 3:16. John 3:16. John 3:16. We see it all the time. Of course, with stadiums being closed or limited in their attendance, we don't see it flashed on TV screens as much, but we can still see it many other places.

I love the verse John 3:16, it's been called "The gospel in a nutshell." It's the foundation of our Christian Faith. It's what makes our particular way of looking at the world unique.

Yet, there's a problem with this verse. A big problem. I fear that far from being a verse of joy, a verse of celebration, a verse of love, it's been turned by some into a verse of threat, a verse of separation, a verse of judgement. In fact John 3:16, far from being a way of introducing people to Jesus, has become a very effective means of driving people away from Jesus and the church.

Today, we are talking about John 3:16, but not only about John 3:16. You may notice that when we pastors offer our sermons, we typically don't choose just one verse to talk about. Rather, you will hear a number of verses together, in order that the message be heard in context. In other words, the Bible is a big book composed of 66 smaller books, which are divided into chapters, and then in to verses. Just picking one verse to talk about and ignoring the rest can result in very strange interpretations.

Think of your own emails and text messages. What if people only looked at just one sentence and concluded that's what the entire thing was about? The Bible is the same way. Some people look at the Bible as a string of pearls that you can mix and put together in any order. You can take a verse from Genesis, another one from Psalms, and another from Mark to prove whatever you want.

Scripture has been badly abused and twisted to supposedly "prove" that God is for slavery, against women's equality, and positively hates LBGTQ people. In today's passage, too many people have take John 3:16 out of context to use it as a threat of God's punishment.

Listen to what it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Here's the problem: seeing only this verse, this little snippet, could easily lead people not familiar with the rest of John's Gospel to believe that God in Jesus Christ doesn't necessarily want us to perish, but is perfectly willing to condemn anyone who is not "saved." In other words, if you aren't saved, then you are condemned.

But the question, the essential question, is this. What does it mean to be saved? What is salvation? Who gets to decide if someone is saved? The church? The pastor? The elders? What about God? Does God get a say? And if God does get a say in deciding whether we are saved or not, how does God notify us about our condition? I don't know anybody who has the word "Saved" tattooed

on their forehead? Or for that matter, the word “Condemned.” Moreover, what does John mean by eternal life, anyway?

First things first. Let’s talk about salvation, the condition of being saved. What is it? There’s a lot of “church talk” about salvation and much of it is just plain confusing or even downright wrong. So many understand salvation as a tool to judge others with. People who call themselves Christians, pastors, even whole denominations have set themselves up to determine who is in and who is out. Of course, those doing the judging automatically assume that they are in, that they are going to heaven, and they are set forever with God. Many also feel it is their duty to inform the rest of the world of their unsaved status and proceed to threaten them with eternal punishment unless they “get saved” — whatever that means.

Salvation is, first and foremost, simply having a genuine relationship with God. By genuine, I mean first acknowledging there is a Supreme Being or Higher Power who is responsible for creating the universe in general, everything around us, and you and me in particular. God made the physical laws of how the world operates. But I also said relationship. Salvation is not merely a matter of saying, “Hello” to God, but taking the time and effort to start to understand who this God is and what God expects from us — then trying to live our lives in accordance with our understanding.

So let me recap: Salvation is having a relationship with God that accepts God as our creator and recognizes God has certain expectations for our lives. We are saved when our faith in God then motivates us to live our lives according to God’s law and plan.

Does that mean that any person of faith who tries to live according to their understanding of God is saved? Isn’t following Christ a pre-requisite? Well, friends, I’m not God and the ability to determine whether anyone is saved is not my job. There are some Christians and some verses in scripture that seem to say that only those people who believe in God and believe in their heart that Jesus is Lord can be saved. Such a view automatically condemns everyone else who does not confess Jesus as Lord, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and every other religion or non-religion.

Now I am a Christian minister. Today, we will be ordaining and installing new elders for our congregation today. They will say, along with us, that they believe in Jesus Christ and claim him as their Lord and Savior. Every week, as you know, I try to tell you about the love of God revealed in Jesus and try to help you strengthen your faith as you follow Jesus on your personal Jesus. I can tell you about many times and many ways I utterly believe Jesus has touched my life and the lives of people I know, and even the life of our nation and world. If you were to asked me if Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, I would answer unequivocally, yes!

As a Christian, what I can say without hesitation is that faith in Jesus Christ is the best way to understand who God is and what God wants for our lives. The Christian claim that God came to

earth as a particular human being named Jesus of Nazareth is a claim no other religion or faith system can claim. It is unique to Christianity.

Therefore, we believe that God has a close, even intimate relationship with human beings because Jesus understands who we are and what human life and living is about. Jesus experienced the best and worst of humanity. He had close friends, who abandoned him. He healed sick people, who later denied knowing him. He dined with rich and poor alike. He healed foreigners and enemies. He owned little more than the clothes on his back, had no home, and carried no money.

All this is to say that it is hard for me to believe that Jesus, whose life was all about love, would be in the business of condemnation. Yes, Jesus fervently desired us to believe in him and to follow his teachings. Why? For self-satisfaction? For vanity? For power? No. Jesus desires us to follow him because he believes and we proclaim that by trusting in God and following Jesus' way we will experience eternal life.

Eternal life? What is that? What happens when we die? I mean, most of hope that we will somehow meet our friends and family again after our physical bodies stop. Personally, there are also many people I never want to see again, if they are the same as they were when they died. I mean if eternal life implies meeting up with people who hurt us, wronged us, abused us, or even killed us, why would I want to do that? It sounds more like eternal punishment.

Friends, I would be a total fool and an utter liar if I claimed I could tell you the specifics of what happens after we die. The Bible drops only a few hints except for asserting that Jesus came back to life after his crucifixion thereby demonstrating life after death is a reality.

But what Jesus promises right here and right now is that those who have faith in him have eternal life. Yes eternal life, eternal life that is real not after we die, but begins even as we are living.

Eternal Life begins whenever we believe the good news of Jesus Christ. Eternal life grows within us as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. Eternal Life blossoms as we accept more and more Jesus' teachings and strive to apply them to our lives. In short, Eternal Life is all about our journey with Christ, which is happening right now!

So what does it mean to journey with Christ? Is it matter of saying the magic words, "I believe that Jesus is my Lord and Savior?" Is merely speaking proof that we believe in Jesus?

Words are just words. We can recite the creeds, the Lord's Prayer, say, "Amen" every day. But saying without showing that you are walking with Jesus through your actions is meaningless. Are such persons saved? At the same time, what about people who haven't heard of Jesus or don't understand his message, or have been alienated by the church for whatever reason. Are these people condemned just because the don't say the "magic words?"

Friends, I can't believe God in Jesus Christ forms relationships with people simply on the basis of saying some words or even showing up at church every now and then. As a Christian, as a pastor, I consider myself to be exceptionally blessed because I have a front-row seat at witnessing Jesus' life and teachings in action. I have been privileged to get to study Jesus in depth and understand what his mission and ministry is about.

At the same time, I know most people don't have the opportunity I have been given. Does that mean they are inferior to me? Does that mean they aren't as saved as me? No.

At the core of all major religions is a fundamental believe in human dignity and respect. Love for each other is part and parcel of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying anything goes. I repeat my claim that following Jesus gives humanity the best insight into what God is like and what God wants. Nevertheless, I cannot tell you that non-Christians can't also follow the teachings of Jesus, whether they know they are or not.

In other words, does God look at our words or does God look at our hearts? As Christians, we should be able to follow Jesus more closely than non-Christians because we are exposed directly and more frequently to his life and teachings. Nonetheless, we have to acknowledge that there are people who call themselves Christian who do not follow Jesus very well at all and there are non-Christians who follow Jesus' teachings without necessarily knowing they came from him.

Therefore, it is not Jesus who excludes us or, in John's words, condemns us. Rather, we condemn ourselves. Let's face it, it is not difficult to discover the essentials of living a decent human life. When we honor and respect God our creator, when we honor and respect each other, and yes, when we honor and respect ourselves, we are following Jesus whether we know it or not.

Condemnation, or as John puts it, "walking in the darkness instead of the light," is not God's choice, it is ours. Jesus' teachings, whether given by him personally or offered in other forms by other faith systems, are out there, beckoning us to follow. The light of Christ is visible to all and all we need do is walk toward it and not avoid it.

That's what John 3:16 is really about. Jesus has opened the door for us to follow him. He invites the world to come in, no matter how they got there. But the best news of all is that it is Jesus, not you, not me, not the church, not religious authorities, only Jesus who stands at the door to welcome us inside. Jesus is not excluding anybody. It is we who have the choice to exclude him. That is the proof that God so loved the world that God gave us the Son. Believe in him and begin your eternal life right now.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.