

Sermon on John 3:14-21 for March 10<sup>th</sup>

*The Precious Love of Jesus*

This morning, we come to the end of Christ's words to Nicodemus about the new birth. Recapping, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a group known to separate themselves from any impurity proscribed by the Levitical law and an opponent of Jesus or the early Christians. Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish religious civil court called the Sanhedrin. If the Pharisees can be compared to today's religious right, they are a political network of the moral majority for traditional values. The Sanhedrin made up the Jewish court system, which consisted of 71 rabbis. They created and enforced religious rules and punished people for breaking them, yet they bent the rules to accommodate their hypocritical lives.

Nicodemus is only mentioned in the gospel of John. Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus, who visited him at night to discuss his teachings. Why at night? He came to Jesus at night in fear of being associated with Jesus in broad daylight, but later, eventually defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin, insisting, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does (John 7:51)?" Nicodemus also shows up at the burial of Jesus and brings spices for his body. However, Nicodemus was curious about Jesus, and he did not understand the new birth, nor was he willing to acknowledge its effect on the lives of God's children. This affects us, too, as God's children, for we, as his children, cannot be saved through human effort.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus had to do with salvation. So, Jesus has this conversation in verses 14-15, speaking about his death and the necessity for belief in himself by saying, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Then Jesus offers Nicodemus the greatest gift that he would ever receive when he said these words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."

If we are to understand what Jesus is saying about being lifted up, we go back to the strange story I read from the Old Testament in Numbers 21:4-9. Under the leadership of Moses, the people had been wandering around in the desert, and they began to murmur against God and Moses regarding the manna, the staple of their diet. It was a "slap in the face," so to speak, as a demonstration of their lack of appreciation. It was not the first time the people complained about God's treatment of them, and because of these grumblings, instead of healing, God sent these fiery serpents. These serpents sent by God bit them, and they died. What did the people do? Hey Moses, can you intercede for us? And so, he did. When Moses did this, God commanded Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole in the middle of the Israelite camp. The heart of the story lies in God's promise that everyone who had been bitten needed only to first look to the serpent on the pole to be cured. What we need to understand is that the story directs people's faith back to God, a prefigure of raising up the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross; by his sacrifice on the cross, we are saved from sin.

Let us pause to pray.

Lord, help us realize that you have a remedy for every sin, except the sin of rejecting the Remedy: your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Show us that the cross is not a symbol of injustice or suffering or a good life cut short; to those who believe, the cross of Jesus is precious love and our rescue and safety. In this, we pray, Amen.

Have you ever watched a sporting event on television, and all of a sudden, there is this person with a sign with the verse John 3:16 printed on a homemade sign? Maybe you are watching the news, and along the street, at some rally, out pops this person with the same sign. I've seen the verse stuck to car bumpers and billboards. What is one's motivation? Is it a statement about God's love for the world or a threat to those unwilling to accept God's love? Or is it an invitation to participate in spreading God's love or a summons to exclude those we think God does not love? I believe the verse gets so overused that it feels like some all-encompassing human remedy to cure the serpent's bite of sin. Here, take and use this cream for ten days, and you will be healed. No, the fact is that there is no human remedy for sin. The serpent of sin has bitten all of humanity, and in this climate of the world, we see people rushing around in the fury of human religions, seeking comfort from sin.

There is a verse in the Book of Ecclesiastes that tells us, "God will call the past to account" (Eccl. 3:15). This means that even if you were to turn over a new leaf today and hereafter live in a way that was totally acceptable to God, which we know is impossible, God would still be forced to require full payment for those sins of his law that you committed before your reformation. Look at it this way. You are a customer at a store and have been paying on credit, but you have now fallen into massive debt. The store or bank cuts your credit off. Then, you decide to reform and pay cash for everything you buy. Excellent, you are turning over a new leaf, but you hear a voice saying, "When will you be able to make full payment on your old bill?" Wait, I said I'll pay cash from now on. I'm sorry; I will be glad to continue doing business with you, but only if you pay your account in full. In the same way, God requires payment for what is past due. In the end, the cure of sin's bite lies only in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the promises of God that accompany it.

Hopefully, by now, you will have understood that the only thing required of the dying Israelites was that they should have believed God's word about the serpent, looking to it as God commanded. In the same way, we are to look to Christ's cross, for we, too, have been bitten by sin. We are dying in the same way. But you might ask, what about verse 16? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever stretches himself out on him shall not perish but have eternal life." I'm glad you asked because the remedy of God's precious love in this verse can easily be misunderstood. The precious love of God is the fulfillment of the law.

Without a doubt, John 3:16 might well be the most widely recognized verse of Scripture in modern America. Yet, as the late R.C. Sproul explains, John 3:16 is possibly the most distorted and abused of all scriptures. Why? Because much of the secular crowds of the world get upset when, in casual conversation, the name of Jesus gets attention. Pointing to Jesus in John 3:16 makes folks uncomfortable. Yet, the reality is that John 3:16 conveys the essential message any human being can or ever will hear because it captures what God is willing to do for every person who recognizes who He is, what He is, and why He deserves our worship.

Many unbelievers and cults often quote this verse. It became the first verse ever translated into another language, becoming almost instantly known. What happens is that particular verses in the Bible are removed from the verses around them, leading to all sorts of erroneous interpretations. Still, if perhaps you do not connect with this verse, the famous verse gets twisted to go something like this: “God loves everyone so much that He sent Jesus to die and save the world.” In this narrow interpretation, the verse becomes so misleading. Folks, God’s great and precious love is to save those who know Jesus as Lord and Savior. God’s wrath in the Old Testament is not an illusion, an ordinary, misleading, and overly simplistic idea in the church today. The judgment of God cannot be casually swept under the rug in light of God’s precious love revealed in the New Testament. The love and grace of the New Testament do not give outright permission to stray from God’s judgment and truth. We must not cheapen every act of a righteous God. Do I hear an Amen?

In the same way that God sent judgment on the people for their sins in the Old Testament reading from Numbers 21:6-9, he made a way for their repentance for salvation and healing. Now, God, in the same way, has made a way for salvation through Christ Jesus in the New Testament. In the same way as the Old Testament, God’s judgment in Numbers became contingent upon the people’s admission of guilt and acceptance of God’s provision. The belief in Jesus Christ, the one who was lifted up and crucified for the sin of the world, is the belief of faith spoken throughout the Epistles. God did not save the whole world. Instead, God made a way for the salvation of the entire world for those who, by grace through faith, believe.

Have you ever heard the claim that “God hates the sin but loves the sinner? I hear the voices of people state: I am a sinner saved by grace. Yep, grace is part of being saved. However, whoever came up with the phrase, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner,” was attempting to provide the sinner with a scapegoat. Because if God hates only the sin and not the sinner, that would mean that the sin is outside of a person’s control, essentially getting the sinner off the hook. The sin goes to hell, but the sinner goes to heaven. Follow me? If, perhaps, you believe that saying, you might want to get down on your knees and ask for forgiveness. Let’s go a bit further. If someone were to say: God loves me just as I am, how would you respond?

I love the response of the late reformed Presbyterian preacher R.C. Sproul. “The Kingdom of God is not Mr. Rogers’s neighborhood! That statement is both funny and serious. Sproul continues. Preachers who claim that God loves everyone unconditionally are erroneous in theology because the message that is heard by the people who hear those words means that there are no conditions to eternity. I can continue to live just as I am living in total rebellion against God. I have nothing to worry about. God loves me unconditionally, and there is no need to repent. I don’t have to come to Jesus. I don’t have to leave my life of sin. No conditions. No strings attached. God loves me just the way I am, and He is going to be so glad I turned out so nicely.” Brothers and sisters, God’s love and goodwill do not spread equally among believers and non-believers. There is no place for complacency. Sometimes, we close our eyes to what the Bible says frequently about God’s posture toward the impenitent. God detests the wicked. God does not send the sin to hell. No, he sends the sinner. It is dangerous stuff when we tell people God loves them unconditionally.

In closing, while God has provided forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who believe in Jesus, verse 16 also warns that all who do not believe in Jesus will perish. Mark it down that this is the will of God. In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter affirms this truth about God's will, declaring that "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

As we come closer to Easter and the cross, the Kingdom of God is not Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. Here is the remedy, people. The whole gospel story begins with God and ends with everlasting life. It starts with one who had no beginning. It ends with that which has no ending. Accepting the goodness of God's love in the precious love of His Son, Jesus Christ, the one who died for you and me, can change your life, for when God says I love you, it is the message we have all been looking for. Let us lift up our voices and open our hands to cling to the love we cannot comprehend. He is the one who has saved us. He is the one who has embraced us. He is the one who has come and is coming again. Let go of the things that have kept us from Him. He, Jesus, the one who saved and forgave us, our beautiful King, is the remedy. Amen.