

God's Grace in the Night / "For God So Loved the World"

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August 16th, 2020

Last week we set the scene for the conversation that took place between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a respected teacher in his community met with Jesus in the middle of the night and Jesus shared with him the need for an inward change.

A spiritual birth caused by the Holy Spirit resulting in a faith in Jesus that leads to eternal life in God's Kingdom. Jesus called this being "born again"

At the end of our passage last week Nicodemus asked Jesus "How can these things be?" as he marveled in astonishment at the plans of God unfolding before him.

This week we're going to continue to look at Jesus' explanation of how these things can be. We're going to see how Jesus evangelizes and we're going to encounter what might be the most loved, most memorized and most quoted Bible verse in our day today. We love quotable phrases. We speak to one another often using the quotes and phrases of others.

As a child of the 80's and the 90's I feel like I might've grown up in the Golden Age of catchphrases. Maybe you can remember some of these:

Hasta la vista...baby.

Wax on, wax off.

My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.

Run Forrest Run

Don't have a cow, man

I know you are but what am I?

Did I do that?

No soup for you.

Hey You Guys!

It's so weird that these things enter the culture the way that they do and change the way that we talk and relate to one another. They have some kind of impact and they resonate. They encapsulate a moment. And they can have a long shelf life. But then they die. The catchphrase loses its impact. It becomes stale.

We've just heard it too much. Its impact is eventually lost and for those who continue to quote these things, thinking that they're relevant - We roll our eyes.

So is John 3:16 just a worn out catchphrase? Something that's held on a sign at a baseball game? Something that defined a moment, but we've just heard it too much? Too often? Has it become white noise?

Is it so far removed from its original context in your mind that you've never actually considered that the first time these words were spoken was in a private conversation in the middle of the night between Jesus and someone begging to know how can these things be? How is God going to do this? How is he going to take what is wrong between me and him and make it right?

Thankfully, Jesus doesn't just tell Nicodemus how. He also tells him why. And this morning morning we're going to see how Jesus talks about.

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1. God's Great Love
2. Our Great Problem
3. The Greatest Change Imaginable

Let's look again one more time at our passage for today in full.

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John 3:16-21

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, 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. 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."

So the first thing we're going to talk about today is

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God's Great Love

I know don't if there is anything more misunderstood than love. To our great harm and our detriment. Love has become a feeling. A feeling that we fall in and out of. And most often, as played out in life's experiences and in the stories and the entertainment we consume, this feeling of love can be selfish.

We want to be loved. To be valued and affirmed. To have our needs met. To be supported. To be thought of. Cherished and delighted in. We want to be loved. But love is costly. Because love isn't a feeling. Love is an action.

When we fall out of love, what has happened is that we have said the cost is not worth the benefit. Love in this way becomes transactional. With both parties proclaiming, "I will love you, but only if you love me." Without a steady supply of warm fuzzies coming my way, my love for you will run cold.

Praise God for the way he loves us. God's love is costly and generous and met us when we were at our worst.

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John 3:16-18

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, 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.

How much does God love the world?
So much so, that he gave his only Son.

And what did he give his Son to?
Jesus told us in our passage last week in John 3:14-15

*14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

God the Father sent his Son, his only Son, not to be exalted on a throne, but to be lifted up on a cross to die in the place of sinners. In Matthew 12:18-21, speaking of Jesus and God the Father Matthew quotes Isaiah and says

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*18 "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
19 He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
20 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
until he brings justice to victory;
21 and in his name the Gentiles will hope."*

Jesus is God's beloved Son.
The Father makes this explicit at Jesus' Baptism, at the beginning of his ministry

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Matthew 3:16-17

16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

I don't want to presume too much about the mind of God. But doesn't he seem proud?
Like he's saying "that's my boy."

Later in this chapter John has this to say in verse 35

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John 3:35

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

When the Father sent Jesus. He didn't send any son. He sent his beloved son. Understanding the love and relationship between the Father and the Son here is foundational for the Gospel to make a change in your heart. If we rightly understand how the Father loves the Son, we will rightly understand and believe in God's love for us. Because God didn't just send his Son, he gave his Son.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
and why did he do it

*"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."*

How do we know that God loves us? Do we know because of a feeling or because of his actions? Of course it's his actions, what he has done and accomplished for us.

How do we know that God loves us?
Because he loves the Son and he gave his only Son, not to condemn us; to save us.

God looks upon his creation and all of the sinful, and fallen, and rebellious people and He loves them and offers to them eternal life. This was only possible in Jesus. Where there was no hope, through Jesus, God has opened a door. And who can go through it?
The scripture says "whoever believes"

This offer of salvation and forgiveness is extended to the world.
From the best of us to the person whose done their best to do their worst.
To the young and the old. To the rich and the poor.
From every nation and of every race and creed.

Whoever believes in the saving power of the Son should not perish but have eternal life.

Christ has come to save, and he will save all who believe in him. And we need saving. The danger is real. Last week we talked about our spiritual death due to sin. We are, without the work of the Holy Spirit not only spiritually dead, but we have an eternal spiritual death sentence.

When we consider our sin and our rebellion next to the perfection of a Holy God, condemnation would be a reasonable assumption. So when it says that Christ didn't come into the world to condemn us, but to save, this is incredible news. Because the truth is, as we'll see in our next section, we have been condemned already. And on our own, all of us would remain condemned for our sin. And the penalty for sin is death.

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Our Great Problem

turn to John 3:18

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*18 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.*

When it comes to personal morality, and how we understand good and evil, the basic worldview held by most people you'll encounter is this: We are born good. And from there we make good decisions with good consequences or we make bad decisions with bad consequences. But as we talked about last week, a biblical worldview says that we are born spiritually dead.

Remember Ephesians 2:1 from last week.

"And you were dead in trespasses and sins"

another text, Romans 3:10-18 goes on to describe this spiritual deadness in detail

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10 as it is written:

*"None is righteous, no, not one;
11 no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."
13 "Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive."
"The venom of asps is under their lips."
14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."
15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;
16 in their paths are ruin and misery,
17 and the way of peace they have not known."
18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

This is why earlier Jesus stresses the need to be born again. Because without faith in Jesus, without being born again, we are condemned already. When Adam sinned a trial of humanity took place. And God proclaimed a sentence on us all. And it is death.

And if you are here today and you think that the sentence is too harsh I want you to think about this, I heard this somewhere before, I can't remember where. The thought goes like this:

If I went home today and I lied to my kids about something, what would happen to me? Nothing. They're kids. They can't punish me. If I lied to my wife. Well that's different. At the very least, we're going to have to have a long conversation about it and talk about why I did that. Trust has been broken and it will need to be restored with time. Now, If I lie to my boss or someone from the government, I could be fired or go to jail.

In all of these cases, I committed the same crime, right? I lied. But there was an increase in punishment for the very same act. So what changed each time? It the level of Authority of the one I've sinned against.

Who I committed the crime against determines the punishment.

When we lie, we're sinning against the God of truth and his authority is far above all other authorities, judges, and family members. When we commit a sin against the eternally perfect good and true, Holy God of the universe then it demands an eternal punishment because of the authority of the one whom we sinned against.

In this light, when we consider who we have sinned against, the sentence is not too harsh. But is devastating.

Now in our passage today, there is a very distinct difference when we compare it to last weeks passage. Last week began as a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Part meet and greet, part debate. But in today's passage, Nicodemus is speechless. He simply has nothing to add. Why do you think this is?

Do you remember when you "got it"? When it "clicked" for you? When you realized that you were a sinner already condemned, in need of Jesus to save to save you. Do you remember when the good news of the Gospel became good news for you?

The good news became good when you saw clearly the problem between you and God.

In our passage today, Jesus is showing us today how to evangelize.

How can we share and talk about the gospel in a way that magnifies its beauty? We have to talk about how bad things are in our condition without Christ to understand how good they are with him. While every conversation and proclamation of the Gospel will be different, some things are always the same.

In order for people to saving-ly believe in Jesus Before we understand the good news We have to understand the bad news. To be saved, someone needs to know what they are saved from and what they are saved for. If we don't understand the bad news, the good news isn't good.

Jesus understands this and he makes it as clear as possible to Nicodemus and today, to us.

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*18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned,
but whoever does not believe is condemned already*

Jesus makes it simple. And the simplicity on one side is so beautiful that it's almost like the sun, like you can't look directly at it, it's so good and on the other side it is terrifying beyond our comprehension. To be condemned would mean that we will be judged for our sins. In the scriptures, God's judgement against sin is described as his wrath. This is what we are saved from.

John goes on to say in verse 36 of chapter 3

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John 3:36

36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

I think this is the definition of perishing. God's wrath forever against you.

Like when it says in John 3:16

Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Perishing is the alternative to eternal life, an eternal death. It's the default conclusion to a life lived in rebellion. And the deepest rebellion here is presented as not believing in the Salvation of God's Son.

*whoever does not believe is condemned already,
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

Perishing is where we were all headed in our sin. Salvation is the exception. Salvation is an active, rescuing work of God. This is really good news. Eternal life with God free from the sentences of sin and death is what we are saved for.

The bad news is really bad, that's true, but the Good news is really, really good.

The bad news is that

All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God

The bad news is that

you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. following the course of this world

This is our state without God's action.

But God does act. Salvation is an active work of God, motivated by, and powered by his love for sinful people who can't do a thing to save themselves

This is the good news of the Gospel from Ephesians

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Ephesians 2:4-9

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Like we saw last week, God has promised to make us spiritually alive and he does this through faith in Christ. He does this work actively, decisively. He's not just involved in it. It only happens because of him. So doesn't this led you to worship? Doesn't this make you want to sing?

If you see the beauty of Christ...
If you rejoice in his resurrection...

If the sin that once captured your heart is becoming more vile and the indifference you felt towards God is turning into passion for his glory...

If heaven is where your hope is and you know that God will get you there...
Then God has made you alive. He did this.
For you.

If the season we're in right now leaves you feeling like we're in trouble.
We got these masks and this fear of sickness.
What's going to happen with the schools? What's happening to our country?

All of these things are real and they can be anxiety producing for sure.
But the truth is that the least safe you've ever been was before you knew Christ.
That's the most vulnerable that you ever were.

And God has solved that problem for eternity.
That's how we can be sure that he'll be with us through this current trial too.
Because our current trial pales in comparison next to the death sentence that we were under before Christ.

Through Jesus, God has proved his love for us for now and forever.
Our problem was great, His mercy is greater.
Like the song says, right?
Our sins they are many, his mercy is more.

As we move into our last section today
We're going to look at

The Greatest Change Imaginable

In this last part, Jesus sets up a contrast between light and dark. We all understand this metaphor. Light is good. Dark is bad. In the dark we can't see things. We hide things in the dark. In the light we can see. In the light things are exposed, good things and bad things. But Jesus goes further than simply setting up the contrast though. He is calling himself the light and illustrates how people respond to him.

Let's read.
John 3:19-21

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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."

So let's break this section down. This is the ending of our passage and this is such a wonderful way to wrap up what we heard last week and what we've been looking at today.

The greatest change imaginable occurs when People encounter the Light of Jesus. and so I have a couple of sub points for this section to help us see the comparison here

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- a) People encounter the Light**
 - I) Those who hate the Light**
 - II) Those who come to the Light**

And first we'll talk about
I) Those who hate the Light

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John 3:19-20

19 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.

When we encounter Jesus, there is no greater confrontation that our souls will experience.

In the last point ,we looked at our great problem
but it's not just that we sin.
It's that we love sin. That we prefer it.

When we sin, we sin because we want to.
Some of the ways that scriptures describe this

are lusts of the heart, passions of the flesh, pleasure in wickedness, lovers of darkness, rejoicing in evil and in the perverseness of evil.

And so our sin loves the darkness because in it we hide. Our hiding spot is where we can tell ourselves that we're ok. That we don't need God's power, ours is enough. We don't need a change. We are good the way we are. And there are many places to hide.

We can hide in the open. It's true.

We can hide large groups, where we proclaim that light is darkness and darkness is light.

Don't you see this today?

Romans 1:25 says that when we do this we

exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and served the creature rather than the Creator

Gathering together in the open and saying that something wrong is right repeatedly doesn't make the wrong thing right, but it can soothe the conscious to know that others are broken in a similar way. But you don't want to hide in a group commiserate about sin and say "it's not so bad". You want to fight it and make no room for it. Because when we meet the Lord, we won't have a group to hide in. We will stand before him alone.

We can even hide in Churches. We can come near to the light of Christ, but we're not yet willing to do the costly work of letting go of the sins we love.

Is this you? Do you know that there is a place in your heart that you are keeping from God? Do you love your sin more than God? What do believe this sin is providing for you that God is withholding from you?

I want to encourage you today. If you are hiding because you think that God is keeping something good from you, consider Romans 8:32 in light of our time with John 3:16

Romans 8:32

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He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

God isn't holding you back from joy. He's inviting you into it. It's found in Jesus.

Today, don't let your pride stand in the way of the Spirit's work. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you are hiding in darkness because you're afraid and embarrassed, worried about what will happen "lest your works be exposed"...

The truth is that your works are already exposed. God knows them. Your hiding isn't fooling him. Come to Jesus and you'll find God rich in mercy. Able to forgive to the uttermost. Able to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Able to make alive what has been dead.

People encounter the light of Christ and there are those who hate the light and

II) Those Who Come to the Light

Jesus says in Verse 21

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*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.”*

For those whose hearts have been made alive in Christ. Born again through the Holy Spirit. They don't take credit for this change or for anything good in them. The very purpose of life changes and now we live for the glory of God.

This is what it means that people would see that our works have been carried out in God. This work of the new birth. This work of dying to self and living for righteousness. This miraculous work has been carried out by God and we respond in worship and we come to him. This is the greatest change imaginable: that lovers of the darkness would come to love the light. That worshippers of self would worship Jesus as Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:15

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15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Those who come to the light have no fear of being exposed as a sinner. (That's what we are and until Christ comes back, that's what we will be) But we are sinner's saved by God's grace.

Those who have been born again don't hide their imperfections they point to Christ's perfection. They point to Christ's perfection and believe that bit by bit, God is going to continue, through the power of his Holy Spirit in us, to renew our minds and renew our hearts.

I'm so grateful this morning for this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and for the way that it has helped lead me to worship God. Though he was speechless in our text day. John 3 isn't the end of Nicodemus' story in the bible.

He shows up again in John chapter 7 where as a part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, he becomes the only one to defend the process by which Jesus is being judged in the trial that will lead to his crucifixion. He's mocked for this.

But the last time we hear of Nicodemus is after Jesus crucifixion. Where he provides the supplies for Jesus' burial, and assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus to be laid in the tomb.

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John 19:38-42

38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.

39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. 40 So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. 42 So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Nicodemus provided 75 pounds of these burial supplies. This was not cheap. This quantity of balms, and spices, and myrrh was extravagant. One theologian said that "it exceeds all normal proportions. This is a royal burial."

Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus by night, now openly becomes identified with him. The one who asked "How can these things be?", saw the crucifixion with his own eyes. He saw God give his Son.

He saw the how and he knew the why,

"For God so loved the world."

I don't believe this phrase ever became white noise to Nicodemus. And may that be said of us.