

“John 3:16”

John 3:16-21

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Text Comment

There can be no absolute certainty, first century Greek had no quotation marks, but it appears that the Lord’s own words end with v. 15 and v. 16 begins John’s own comment on what has just been said. The writer of the Gospel, having recorded some of the Lord’s own words concerning the new birth and its necessity, and the Lord’s death for our salvation, is led to some summary reflections of his own on the same subject. The “for” with which v. 16 begins, connects John’s summary with what the Lord has just said.

- v.16 “so loved the world” This would have been a new thought for a typical devout Jew of that day. That God loved Israel he would not have doubted. But it was not thought that God loved the world, or that he loved men from every nation and language. No one has been able to find a statement in Jewish materials from the period that speaks of God loving the whole world of men.
- v.17 This kind of statement, about the *mission* of the Son of God in the world, is common in the Synoptic Gospels. E.g. “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” The world was condemned before Jesus got here. He *came* into the world to save it, not to condemn it.
- v.21 Do you see the interesting difference in the contrast between vv. 20 and 21? The man who does evil does not come into the light for fear of exposure. The man who does good comes into the light, not that he will get credit for his deeds, but so that it will be seen that God has been at work in him. Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light so shine before men that they will see *your* good deeds and glorify *your father* who is in heaven.”

I don’t suppose there would be much debate if I were to suggest that John 3:16 is the best-known and best-loved verse in the Bible. Many unbelievers and, alas, even some Christians, like Matthew 7:1 better and use it more often – “Do not judge or you too will be judged!” – but most of them couldn’t tell you the reference. But multitudes know John 3:16. Even those who couldn’t quote the verse, recognize the reference. They see it on placards at sporting events. They see it on billboards and painted on the side of barns. And they see it in churches. The church in which I was raised had John 3:16 in gold script on the front wall of the sanctuary, behind the pulpit.

Christians love the verse for its great statement that the salvation of men flows from the loving heart of God and for its perfectly clear, straightforward articulation of the summons of the gospel: believe in Jesus and you will live forever.

But, left there, we are in danger of reading John 3:16 and even believing its great statement in a merely sentimental way. When I say sentimental, I mean, we think about something in the way *we would like* to be true, not necessarily the way that *is* true. For the fact is, this great verse is *brimming with controversy*, with thunder and lightning. There may be wonderful sweetness in it, surely there is, but there is power behind it. *And all of this is demonstrated beyond question in*

the five verses that follow and explain and develop the thought of John 3:16. If you follow the thought from v. 16 to v. 21 you will see it is all connected. The fact of God “sending his Son” is repeated in v. 17. The necessity of men and women “believing in him” is taken up in v. 18. And so on.

Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the Bible in miniature.” And he was right. But he was right only because there is a great deal more in this verse than many see at first glance.

Let me show you what I mean.

First, there is in the verse a radically negative judgment pronounced on the world.

The word “world” is used in different ways in the Bible and in the Gospel of John. For example, it can mean the entire created order. John has used the word in that sense in 1:10 in which he says that Christ made the world, or in 21:24-25 where John says that the world is a big place that can hold *a lot* of books! The term can also refer to the nations, the human community. Jesus, you remember, said that he would not return and the end of the age would not appear until the gospel had been preached in all the world (Mark 14:19), which is to say, to all the nations, all the peoples of the world. This use of the term is important in the NT precisely because the Jews did not think in terms of God’s salvation embracing the Gentile nations.

But, ordinarily in John, “world” means “fallen humanity and its ways, [apart from and] alienated from God and his truth.” [Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 37] “World” is, therefore, the community of men and nations insofar as it is in rebellion against God. “The world hates me...” the Lord says in John 7:7. The world cannot accept the Lord because it does not see him or know him. (14:17) The Devil is the prince of this world. (14:30) His disciples do not belong to the world. (15:19) The Lord said in his great prayer in John 17:9, “I pray for [my disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me.” And many other texts like that! As J.I. Packer puts it, “[world] is simply a synonym for bad men everywhere.” [*God’s Words*, 65]

One commentator sums up the meaning of the word “world” and concludes this way:

“Therefore when John tells us that God loves the world (3:16), far from being an endorsement of the world, it is a testimony to the character of God. God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad.” [Carson, 123]

The great Benjamin Warfield said the same thing in his more magisterial manner.

“The world is just the synonym of all that is evil and noisome and disgusting. There is nothing in it that can attract God’s love... the point of [the word’s] employment [in John 3:16] is not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when he gave his Son for it.” [*Biblical Studies*, 514ff.]

You see, in John, the “world” used in this sense, its primary sense in John, contains no believers. Those who come to believe in Jesus, the Lord himself will say later, are *no longer* of the world, they have been chosen “out of the world” (15:19). If Jesus is the Savior of the world, well, then obviously the world needs to be saved. And that is the explicit teaching of the next verse. Apart

from faith in Jesus Christ, the world *is condemned*. And that point is confirmed in the verses that follow. The world that God loved and sent his Son to save *is rotten*. To say that God loved “the world” in John 3:16, is akin to saying what Paul says in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And to what he says in 5:10: “When we were God's *enemies* we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son.”

Indeed, the world is so wicked, so much God's enemy, so contrary to God and to what is pleasing to God, that John elsewhere forbids Christians to love the world or anything in the world (1 John 2:15-17). There is no contradiction here. God loves the world with a selfless, sacrificial, love. He loves the world in order to redeem it, to save it, to transform it, to make it good. When Christians are forbidden to love the world, they are forbidden to love it in the sense of accepting it as it is, participating in its way of life, wanting to part of it. We are not forbidden from loving the world in the sense of hoping for and working for its salvation.

So God can love what is wicked, what is otherwise condemned. Think of the judgment that God pronounces on Moab in Jeremiah 48: 26ff. “Let Moab wallow in her own vomit; let her be an object of ridicule... In Moab I will put an end to those who make offerings on high places and burn incense to their gods.... Moab will be destroyed as a nation because she defied the Lord.” But, in the same text we read the Lord saying, “Therefore I wail over Moab, for all Moab I cry out.... So my heart laments for Moab like a flute...”

Well, so here in John 3:16. God so loved *the world*...that community of men and nations in rebellion against him, living in every manner of way that offends his holiness and his goodness. Still he loved that world!

Second, there is in John 3:16 a radical antithesis posed between believers and unbelievers, between those who receive and accept Jesus and those who do not.

There are two and only two kinds of people in the world: those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. All other distinctions between human beings are comparatively inconsequential. In 3:16, those who believe live forever and those who do not will perish, or, as v. 36 has it, have God's wrath upon them.

But it is not only their destinies that differ. There is an absolute antithesis between their lives in the here and now. In v. 18, the one who does not believe is already condemned, he is condemned *now*, he has the wrath of God on him *now*. The believer already has eternal life coursing through him or through her. Unbelievers love darkness and hate the light, because their deeds are evil. In loving darkness they are loving themselves, in hating the light they are hating the opposite of themselves.

Strong language, indeed! You know very well how unbelievers would react to such a characterization of themselves or to the suggestion that only Christians love the light. Tell your unbelieving friend that he loves darkness, but you love light. See what *he* thinks about that! But, it is John's teaching. He uses the verb “to hate” twelve times in his Gospel, almost a third of the total number of uses of the verb in the NT. And always to make this same point: that the sinful world hates God, hates Christ, hates what they stand for, and hates those who love and trust in them. The contest between the unbelieving world and Jesus Christ may sometimes seemed to be waged with courtesy and respect, but, at bottom, it is a bitter hatred that the world has for Christ, no matter his love for the world!

And the reason is, as John says in v. 19, is because their deeds are evil. There is a moral basis for unbelief. To come to Christ would amount to exposing one's life for the evil that it has been, the darkness it has been. To come to Christ is tantamount to the admission that one has been a failure as a human being, a failure root and branch. Men value their pride, they love themselves too much for that. They would rather remain in the darkness than admit that they live in it!

Do you remember that scene near the end of King Ahab's life? It is reported in 1 Kings 22. Ahab wanted to go to war against his enemies, in order to recover territory they had taken from him. And he had sought the assistance of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, in that undertaking.

Jehoshaphat, was a believing man, a godly man, and so naturally he suggested that the Lord's prophets should be consulted before committing to battle. Ahab, therefore, gathered them all together, and to the man they gave a favorable judgment on the plan and urged the kings to go forward. Jehoshaphat, however, was no idiot. He knew that Ahab's prophets were worthless, sycophants who would tell the King whatever he wanted to hear. So he asked if there wasn't at least one true prophet of the Lord that they could consult. Ahab replied, "There is one more, Micaiah, the son of Imlah, through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad."

How perfectly true to life that reaction on Ahab's part. We don't want to hear the truth if it condemns us, if it makes us feel bad, if it makes us look bad. And that is exactly what John means when he says that fallen man, sinful man, man by nature, loves darkness rather than light because he fears exposure.

We live in a culture that has made a massive investment in the protection of people from this exposure. We have made the condemning of the practices of others the unforgivable sin in our culture. We have provided excuses for every form and manner of bad behavior and taught generations of people not to condemn themselves for it. And, correspondingly, our culture hates the light as virulently as any culture in the history of the world.

And that is why, in this culture, fewer and fewer people are becoming Christians. In Europe and North America in particular, the number of evangelical Christians is much lower per capita than it was a generation ago. In North America it is half what it was in 1960, in Europe it is a third of the number in 1960, down to 4.7% of the population.

And the human explanation of this is simple enough. All men love darkness rather than light. But we live in a culture that is urging the darkness upon us, defending our love of it, demonizing the light and all who bring the light, and, all the while, in the media which is constantly bombarding us and influencing us, the darkness is being dressed up to look like the light. And so men and women are able to live in darkness all the while thinking themselves to be basking in the light. The Devil himself, remember, the Prince of Darkness, dresses up as an angel of light! And we live in a world that is following him in lockstep.

But Christians do not live in darkness. They love the light, they come into it. They have found the truth and have been set free by it.

So that is what lies in and beneath the beautiful John 3:16! The immeasurable love of God and the promise of everlasting life is set against the backdrop of a wicked world that stands under the

condemnation and wrath of a holy God and which is full of unbelievers who love darkness and hate the gospel light by which they would be exposed for what they are.

That isn't what most people think about when they see a placard at a football game with John 3:16 written on it. But that is what John meant when he wrote that most famous verse.

You young people, listen to me. You are in for a surprise as you get older and start talking to people, perhaps quite sophisticated people, perhaps in some ways very impressive people, but people who are not Christians. And you will discover that far from believing in Jesus Christ as you do, far from thinking it the most wonderful thing in the world that he came to save us from our sins and give us eternal life, far from gratefully accepting that gift for themselves, *they do not want Christianity to be true!*

You might very well think that, given the message, the world would want Christianity to be true. Eternal life in a world of endless and perfect bliss, joy, and love! And, to obtain that life nothing is required of you but that you receive it as a free gift and love the one who gave it to you! We think, "*Who could possibly not want that to be true?*" But they do not want it to be true. They would be delighted, perhaps secretly, perhaps quite openly, delighted to learn that the bones of Jesus Christ had been dug up in Jerusalem or that somehow it could be definitely proved beyond any dispute that there is no God, and that the whole of religion were a pure invention, a superstition.

Why? For goodness sakes, why? Because men love the darkness rather than the light. They love themselves, sinners that they are, and do not want to be exposed. Do not want to be condemned. Do not want to be shown up to be bad.

People do not say this openly or admit this about themselves, of course. To do so would be tantamount to loving the light and hating the darkness. But it is the truth about them. And modern man shows it as well as any generation of human beings. For he is willing, so it seems, to give up meaning, purpose, and hope in life, just to protect himself or herself from exposure. As Flannery O'Connor, the novelist, once wrote, ours is an age "that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily." [*Mystery and Manners*, 159.]

And all of this is why the conviction of sin and repentance is so utterly crucial to salvation. As Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan put it long ago, "He who makes little of his disease, makes little of his doctor."

No one is going to be moved by the thought of God loving the world so much as to send his one and only son, until he sees himself a part of a world that is corrupt, and selfish, and hateful, and impure, and proud, and stubbornly resistant, defiantly hostile to the truth about itself.

No one is going to feel an immense sense of relief and hope in the thought that there may be salvation for him, or that she might know the love of the God who made her, or that there is a world utterly unlike this world, in which the promise of this world, and the longings of this world, and the beauty that is still in this fallen world, are wonderfully fulfilled and that forever, who does not first admit that he needs to be saved, that she really does and has all along loved the darkness rather than the light.

You must face verse 19 before you can understand or embrace verse 16. You must hear in your heart the verdict being read out against you, that you have all along loved the darkness rather than the light, before you will ever find the life and the love and the hope that is to be found in John 3:16.

And that is why the Holy Spirit begins there. He begins by causing people to see themselves for what they really are, their behavior for what it really is. He makes them to see the darkness in themselves and to begin to long for the light.

Then, to hear that God has so loved this dark world, that he gave his only Son for it, to save it, why, that is good news indeed!

The wonderful thing about the Bible is that it is true. And the reason most people in the world will not accept the Bible is precisely the same: it is true. And the truth about us is not welcome to us. We much prefer to believe comforting lies about ourselves than to face the terrible truth.

And that is the truth about everyone of us as we are by nature! Which is why, before John 3:16, the Lord said, we have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God. You and I, left to ourselves, would remain happily with the world all our lives. We would be utterly unmoved by the thought of God's love for the world or the sacrifice of his Son. Why we Christians, who have still so much left of our old selves, find that indifference in our souls all the time. We hate it now, we know how false it is, how wrong. But its power, even in the renewed heart, is reminder enough to us of how utterly in bondage to darkness we would have remained apart from the grace of God!

But then came the love of God, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Do you remember Rudyard Kipling's testament to a mother's love?

If I were hanged on the highest hill,
I know whose love would follow me still.
If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
I know whose tears would come down to me.
If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole.

There is something past wonderful in a mother's love, tenacious, indefectible as it is. But she is loving her own child, her son. She is not loving her enemy. She is not loving someone who stands against everything she holds dear and precious.

But God loved the world, corrupt and unworthy as it is, and he loved it so much he gave his own son, whom he loved more than any human mother has ever loved her son, gave him up to suffering and, humiliation, and death to save that world. And whoever believes in Jesus Christ, no matter the darkness of his life up to that point, will live forever in the love of God.

And *that* is the greatest fact in all the world. It is really the only fact that matters.

Accept the verdict that you, by nature, loved darkness rather than light. That you were a part of that world that has nothing but contempt for the God who made it. And, then, accept that God

loved the world and sent his son to save it, and you will find your fingers closing around the secret of all life.