

13. THE LOVE THAT SAVES AND CONDEMNS (3:16-21)

The title of this study may seem somewhat contradictory – for if love saves, how can it also condemn? And what kind of love condemns? Surely if you love someone you do not want to condemn them but save them? Although this may defy logic, as you shall see, the love spoken of in this section does indeed both save and condemn, as it provides several contrasts between those who are saved and those who are condemned.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Lloyd-Jones wrote, “The clever men of the world today are laughing at the cross, they are mocking it, they are jeering at it, they are making fun of the blood of Christ, and they are trying to ridicule it. They are only doing what their prototypes did in the first century. That is what the world has always done to him”.⁷¹ Although written in 1986, these words still ring true today. What ways have you encountered or experienced that are examples of what Lloyd-Jones is describing?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To fully appreciate what is being said in this section, it is helpful to understand some of the context. As has already been mentioned in study 4, the Jews in Jesus’ day were not expecting a Messiah like Jesus, but rather a political messiah – a king to condemn the Romans and free the Jews from oppression. They were wanting someone to be on their side, to save and lead the people of Israel only. To vindicate them and so prove that they are God’s chosen people. Their attitude at the time is the same as that of many in the Old Testament – that God is concerned only for Israel. In a sense, that only Israel and those who happen to convert to Judaism will be in heaven, and the rest of the nations will perish. To them, salvation meant the judgement and destruction of their enemies.

It is generally accepted that this attitude was fuelled by the Greek invasion under Alexander the Great. He introduced the concept of citizenship which included both membership of the Greek state or nation, and a particular way of life. Alexander and his successors encouraged non-Greeks to Hellenise (i.e. to become Greek), which could be achieved by speaking the Greek language, adopting the Greek lifestyle, and worshipping the many Greek gods and goddesses. Although many Jews were attracted to certain aspects of Greek culture, many others rejected the path and remained true to their Jewish heritage.⁷²

This Jewish thinking was further fuelled when the Romans arrived. For they sought worship not only of their many gods and goddesses, but also of the emperor, Caesar. This is an abomination to the Jews, and their resistance to it led to further oppression by the Romans.

As we shall see, verse 17 directly challenges this thinking.

⁷¹ Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn. 1986. *The Cross*. Westchester, IL: Crossway, p100.

⁷² Sim, David C. 2013. “Gentiles, God-Fearers and Proselytes”. In *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* edited by David C. Sim and James S. McLaren, p12.

THE REASON CHRIST CAME (VV16-17)

Last time we unpacked verse 16 and unpacked the truths related to God loving the world and giving His Son, so we will not consider that verse again this time. However, those truths provide the backdrop this study – Where John 3:16 provides the motive behind Jesus coming to the world, the Father's love, verse 17 tells us why He was sent.

Despite the many sermons and books dealing with John 3:16, it should not be isolated from verse 17. This is because focussing only on verse 16 may lead to people thinking that salvation is mostly, if not all, our responsibility in that it is our faith that saves us. This makes faith to be a work that we have to perform. It ignores the truth that faith is a gift from God (cf. Eph. 2:8-9).

Although we are called to believe, that is all we have to do on our part, it is God who does the work of salvation. And part of that work is giving us the faith to believe in the first place. This is further highlighted in the second half of verse 17, "*in order that the world might be saved through Him*". It is only through Jesus Christ that anyone can be saved, no one else.

This is the love that saves as God takes the initiative. He did the work that you cannot do, and paid the price you cannot pay, so that you might see the Kingdom of God.

But this not all the good news in verse 17, for the first half states something most people like to hear, "*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world*". No one likes to be condemned. Even when someone is guilty of a crime, a defendant will hire defence attorneys to plead their case.

People will always seek a way to be saved when they realise that they are in danger. The Pharisees did not believe that they were in any spiritual danger, only physical danger from their Roman oppressors. And so verse 17 challenges their thinking – the Messiah did not come to condemn the world, not even Israel's enemies. This expands on what we saw last time that God loves the world, not only Israel. Furthermore, His offer of salvation is available to "*whoever believes*" – that is all people – irrespective of nationality. This includes Israel and their enemies, and by extension, all peoples and nations today.

But before we point fingers at the Pharisees, we need to recognise that people are the same today. In some cultures, sin is not considered sin until one is caught – if no-one knows about it and you get away with it, then you are innocent – this thinking is very prevalent in many African cultures. People go through life living as though God is not watching them, and until He catches them in the act, they think that they have escaped. However, as we shall see with verse 18, these people have deceived themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. What are some examples from the four gospels where Jesus lived out verse 17's description of not coming to condemn the world? Are there times when He did speak words of condemnation? If so, who does He speak to and why does He speak to them in such a condemning manner?

2. As Christians, what should we learn from Jesus' example of speaking the truth while at the same time not condemning? What does this look like in our lives and in the church?

THE REALITY OF THE CONDEMNATION (V18)

Jesus did not need to condemn the world because the truth is, the world is already condemned. Since man first sinned in the garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3), mankind has been under condemnation (cf. Rom. 5:12-13; 1 Cor. 15:21-22) and all are born in sin. Man is not forced by God, nor tempted by Him, to sin (James 1:13-15). This is what is referred to theologically as the Doctrine of Original Sin (cf. Psalms 51:5; Rom. 7:7-25; Eph. 2:3).

Many people struggle with this doctrine and ask, "Why should all of humanity be condemned for the actions of one couple thousands of years ago?" But the reality is, would you be any different? If you were one of the first people on earth and the serpent approached you, how would you have responded? If you think that you would not have given in to the temptation, then you have proven the opposite, for that is pride speaking. If you give in to temptation today, even as a Christian, how can you think that you could fare better? Being unable to resist temptation today is proof that you too would have failed then too. The many atrocities in history further testify to this, for no one other than Christ has been able to resist temptation.

So when Jesus came, He did not have to condemn anyone, for all are already condemned, instead He came to provide the means by which people can be saved from the condemnation brought upon themselves by their sin. This is again love that saves.

However, this saving love also condemns. Read John 3:18 again and not the line of argument: Those who believe are not condemned (i.e. they are saved), but whoever does not believe is condemned already. Why? "*Because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*". By rejecting the Son of God, one is rejecting the love of the Father that motivated the gift.

What is important to understand here is that one is condemned "*because he has not believed*" but not in the sense that one lacks faith that causes him to stand condemned. If someone thinks that he is acceptable before God, but then is condemned because he refuses to believe in Jesus, then Jesus coming leads to its condemnation – the very thing this passage denies. On the contrary, because of sin men stand condemned already, before Jesus came (cf. Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:10-11, 22). Forgiveness is available through the death and resurrection of Jesus only, but one must believe that to receive the forgiveness. By rejecting the Son, one remains under the condemnation and is condemning oneself.

To put this another way, verse 17 implies that Jesus did not come to condemn the world in an active manner, that is, He did not come as a judge to preside over mankind and to judge us for eternity. Rather He came as the one to free the world from the condemnation it is already under. So in effect, those who do not believe in Him are passively condemned by God's love as His love on display presents a situation in which people condemn themselves. And so it is in this sense that love condemns.

One day, however, that will change when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead (cf. Mat. 25:46; 2 Tim. 4:1) – this will be an active Judgement by Jesus.

So the reason for Christ's coming is to save the world from the reality of the condemnation that it was already under. And this salvation is available to all who believe. This means to fully trust in the work of the cross – to not give in to the temptation to add anything to the work, nor to take anything away from it. But this belief is more than simple mental assent of just believing that what God says is true, but trusting in Him – that is to put your full weight and confidence in Him.

Note: The word used for “believe” in verses 16 and 18 is the same root word that is translated as “entrust” or “commit” in John 2:24. Believing in Jesus implies a commitment.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. What does 3:16–18 tell us about God the Father?
2. In the sermon, two areas where the reality of the condemnation were applied were in evangelism and teaching. What other areas of ministry and church life, if any, can we apply this same principle to? How does it affect how we perform those ministries?

THE RESPONSES OF MAN (VV19-21)

Here John reintroduces us to the imagery of light from chapter 1 (see John 1:4-9; cp. 8:12; 9:5), but instead of speaking of it in abstract terms like he does there, he makes it more concrete by showing how people physically respond to the light that is Christ. Responses that are just as obvious today.

Rejection (vv19-20)

Here we see the natural aversion that the people of the world have towards the light. We are living in a very dark world. But have you ever wondered why people remain in the darkness and find it hard, if not impossible, to turn from it? Verse 19 tells us, “*the people loved the darkness rather than the light*”.

But there is something very interesting with the word for “love” that John uses here – it is the same word used for God's love in verse 16, *agapé*. The condemned love the darkness with the same self-giving love that God has for the world. They essentially sacrifice themselves to the darkness.

You see, the problem is not one of ignorance of the gospel, or of not knowing the difference between right and wrong, nor is it an intellectual problem as if they need to be convinced of the truth, no, it is an inner disposition, a love, for darkness.

So as you share the Gospel with people, when they choose not to listen to you or respond negatively, it is because they love the darkness. And they are not rejecting you, they are rejecting the light that they already hate. They are condemning themselves by turning their backs on the love that can save them.

And things are growing worse by the day, as sin is constantly being redefined as good, and justified as normal, when God tells us quite the opposite. Thus governments and apostate churches tell us that homosexual behaviour is to be accepted as a normal, healthy alternative lifestyle, when the Bible tells us that homosexuals have no place in heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:8-11). This love for the darkness is what is driving men to become women and women becoming men. And do not think that this is only in the world, for it is also evident within the church. These people are guilty of calling evil good and good as evil (cf. Isa. 5:20; Jer. 4:22).

Read Isaiah 28:15 which describe this heart problem in no uncertain terms.

John 3:20 gives further insight into the condemned person's attitude towards the light, "*For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed*". Note the intensity of John's words, they "*hate*" the light. This stands in stark contrast to their *agapé* love for the darkness. It also also diametrically opposite to God – He loves the world but hates the darkness – which ought to be the Christian's attitude too. Because of their attitude, the condemned avoid the light so that their sin will not be exposed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Consider the light and darkness in 3:19-21. What is it about the light that people without Christ fear? Give some examples of this fear at work.
2. Jesus was sent by God the Father because of His love to save, not to condemn. Why, then, do you think that talking about Jesus is so often socially unacceptable?

However, the day is coming when their deeds will be exposed for everyone to see, and they will not be able to escape (cf. Rev. 6:12).

And unfortunately, the church panders to these people at times, and avoids shining light on sin and church discipline. Instead they brush the sin under the carpet and ignore it, hoping that it will just go away. Church leaders are often frustrated by the apparent lack of success in evangelism and preaching and are tempted to use non-biblical church growth methods. But the problem in both cases is a spiritual one and not a practical one – because they love darkness and hate the light, they avoid the light and so will not enter the church for fear of being exposed..

Therefore, one of the worst things we can do is to encourage people to enjoy church without challenging their love of sin. Exciting church services and other activities may draw people in, but they are not drawing people to the light and do not promote true and saving faith.

Paul said in Romans 1:16 that he is not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God to salvation. If we want people to come to faith, if we want people in the church, we cannot be ashamed of the Gospel and water it down for the sake of keeping the peace. If we want people to respond in the right way, then we have to proclaim and live the gospel.

Right Living (v21)

This verse is a description of what happens to a person when God starts working with the heart. When you are born again, when the light starts to expose sin, instead of being condemned, you feel a conviction deep within that stirs you to not like the way you are. You begin to dislike living a life of sin and you suddenly desire to be different. But then something starts to change within you as you begin to do something else, you pursue truth and find yourself, like a magnet, being drawn to the Light. Then, once you are truly in the light, you will desire to keep God's commandments, not for His favour, but in response to the work He is doing in you.

Initially the people in this verse are in the darkness like everyone else but because they are born again, instead of running away from the light, they come to it. They are not afraid to have their works exposed for their works are of God. They know that what they are doing pleases God. They have nothing to fear from examination of God's Word, because the Word does not condemn them. Should they find that they are wrong in any way, they are thankful that it was pointed out to them because now they can correct their behaviour, words, and thoughts.

But notice that there are only two responses. It is one or the other – there is no third choice. This means that you cannot live in the light and still desire to conduct acts of darkness. It means that those who continue to live a life of sin, although they claim to be believers, are still living in darkness, and should anyone attempt to expose their darkness, they will either run away out of fear of being exposed, or try to justify their sin by using Scripture or taking advantage of the grace of God.

So the reason why the Son of God was sent, was to save the world from the reality of condemnation, to which people can respond either with rejection or right living.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The standard by which Christians measure their life is Christ. What other areas does society, government, family tradition, culture, even the church, use to measure people's lives?
2. As Christians, how should we follow the example of Jesus' love as He brings His light to the world. Read Matthew 5:14-16; how are we to be the light of the world?
3. Do you feel free from condemnation because of what Christ has done? How can you remind yourself and other believers that there is no condemnation for those in Christ?