“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD”

Scripture: John 3:11-21.

If I only had one lesson to teach, the passage we’re in this morning in John Chapter 3 would be the one. It is the most important message we can give. Jesus tells us in verses 11 thru 21 how to be saved. In last week’s lesson Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Jesus told him unless a person is born of water and of the Spirit they cannot enter God’s kingdom. It takes a divine miracle from God, a spiritual re-birth. Jesus continues his conversation with Nicodemus and tells him specifically how to get into the kingdom, how to be saved. It’s one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. The key word repeated seven times in this passage is the word “believe.” Believing is how we receive for ourselves this new birth that Jesus has been talking about. God extends the new birth to us and then we respond by faith believing.

READ John 3:11-12.

Jesus begins by addressing the problem of unbelief. This hits at the very heart of Nicodemus’ primary obstacle in following Jesus, which he expresses in verse 9: “How can these things be?” His problem is not ignorance. Jesus knows his heart and recognizes that his primary problem is unbelief. And that is the main reason people don’t accept the gospel message -- unbelief. The gospel message is clear and simple. It’s really not that hard to understand. In fact the gospel message is so simple that even children can hear it, understand it and respond to it. The problem is that people willfully choose not to believe it. In Romans Chapter 1 verses 18 thru 32 Paul tells us that when men had the truth of God, they refused to believe it. They took the truth of God and changed it into a lie. John 1:9 says that Jesus Christ is “the true light, which gives light to everyone…” Later in our text today Jesus will say, “people loved the darkness rather than the light.” What condemns men and women to hell is not their ignorance – they know the truth. It’s their unbelief.

In verse 11 Jesus says, “we speak of what we KNOW, and bear witness to what we have SEEN..." Who is the “we” Jesus is referring to? Himself and then all those who have believed that He is the Son of God. So far in our study of the Gospel of John we’ve heard testimony from several of these witnesses to the truth – Jesus, John the Baptist, Philip, Andrew and Nathanael. All offered their personal testimony of what they knew and saw. By the way, the best way to share the gospel with someone is to offer them your own personal testimony. Tell them what God has done for you, how He changed you, and what He is currently doing in your life.

The bottom line is that to this point Nicodemus does not believe the testimony of Jesus. But he’s not alone. Paul says in 1 Cor 2:14, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” The things of God will not make any sense to a person who does not believe. So Jesus basically is telling Nicodemus here, “You do not receive our testimony because you do not believe.”

Many people including Nicodemus supposedly “believed” in Jesus. John 2:23 says that “many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.” Nicodemus was apparently one of these people. He says to Jesus in John 3:2, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” A lot of people have some understanding and a superficial belief about Jesus. They might even like some of Jesus' teachings. But is that enough? No. Unless you believe what Jesus tells you, then your so-called belief is really unbelief. Jesus basically tells Nicodemus in verse 12, “I don't think you’re ready to receive what I’m telling you because of your unbelief.”

I remember several years ago witnessing to this guy. He was a nice looking, intelligent young man who had been raised up in the church. His mother was a Sunday School teacher. He knew the gospel message, all the stories about Jesus. He knew how to be saved. But he told me that he just could not bring himself to believe, to receive the truth of the gospel for himself. He just couldn’t believe it was that simple. There just had to be more to it than that. So I used one of my favorite analogies on him. You are awakened in the middle of the night while staying in a hotel. You are on the 5th floor,. Flames are in the hallway and smoke is pouring in under your door. The only way out is the window. You break the window. Smoke and fire begin to fill your room. Firemen on the ground below see you and tell you to jump into their net. You look around for any other alternatives but there are none. You can stay where you are at and hope they put the fire out or you can jump into the firemen’s net. Those are your only options. I said you can say to yourself all you want that there is a net down there and those firemen will catch you. But at some point you have to exercise your own faith and jump. Otherwise you will die in the flames. You know, he didn't like that. We parted ways friendly enough, but to this day, having lost contact with him, I don’t know if he ever accepted Jesus as his Savior. I pray for him whenever he comes to mind and I hope that one day he does jump into the loving arms of Jesus. He knows the truth. The question is will he believe it and accept it by faith? Will he act on the knowledge he has?

The good news is that Jesus has the answer for our unbelief. He lays it out clearly beginning in verse 13...a very familiar passage.

READ John 3:13-17.

There it is…the simple gospel message. We could not reach God so He came down from heaven to reach us. Jesus, the Son of man, the only begotten Son of God came. He came to die on the cross to make full payment for sins. Why would God do that? Because He loves us. Our part is simply to believe in Him. Each individual must believe for himself or herself that Jesus’ death was for them personally, for their sins. Each person must accept this by faith and then they will be saved. Whoever believes in Him will not perish, will not go to an eternal hell. Instead, they will enjoy everlasting life in heaven.

READ John 3:13. You don’t find God thru religious acts, but only thru faith in Jesus Christ. You either believe what Jesus claims about Himself and about how to have eternal life or you reject it. We human beings can’t ascend up into heaven and find the answers for ourselves. God knew that. So instead He sent His Son Jesus down here from heaven to provide us with the answer...He alone is the way to God. This point is emphasized by Jesus all throughout the Gospel of John:

In John 6:41 He says, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” In John 6:48 He says, “I am the bread of life.” In John 7:37 He says, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” In John 8:12 He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” In John 10:9 He says, I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved…” In John 10:11 He says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” In John 11:25 He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” In John 14:6 He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus gives us the answer and here it is: salvation does not come by religious activity, but it comes thru the person of Jesus Christ.

READ John 3:14. Jesus likens His future death on the cross to an event recorded in Numbers Chapter 21. Nicodemus, of course, would have been familiar with the story. The Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and they were complaining incessantly until God had enough. He sent a whole bunch of deadly snakes into the camp and all the people got bit. They were all lying around in pain and many were dying. However they repented. They realized they were wrong and deserved this punishment. So God says, “OK, Moses, on the basis of their repentance, you take a brass pole and a serpent, place it in the center of the camp and anybody who looks at that will be healed instantly.”

Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Of course, Jesus is referring to the cross. Here's the parallel between Moses’ brass serpent and Jesus’ death on the cross: (1) both require the acknowledgement of personal sin against God and a need for repentance; (2) in both cases it requires faith in God and His provision in order for healing to take place.

READ John 3:15. To believe in Him means to believe that everything Jesus says is true. This is the belief that saves, that leads to eternal life. It’s not just a matter of saying, “Jesus, I know You come from God.” That’s a good start. But saving faith is placing our lives, our entire hope, completely in His hands…trusting in Him alone to save us. Going back to my previous analogy, it is not just believing with my head that there is a firemen’s net down there that is ready and able to catch me if I jump, but actually believing to the point where I push myself out of the window and leap into it.

READ John 3:16. This is such a powerful verse – the gospel so clearly laid out for us; the plain truth about how to be saved. It's all right there. I pray that our familiarity with John 3:16 never loses its life-changing meaning to us.

READ John 3:17. Remember that Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee. The Jews had the common idea that when Messiah came, His first act would be to wipe out the Romans. They thought that when the day of the Lord came, it was going to be glory for Israel and God would wipe out everybody else. But what does Jesus say? That is not the point of His coming. The point of His coming is not to redeem Israel and condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Jesus came for salvation, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. That is exactly what Jesus meant back in verse 10 when He said Nicodemus, a Pharisee, an educated Jew, should have known these things. In God's covenant with Abraham He says, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

READ John 3:18. The condemnation Jesus is speaking about here is going to hell. Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Praise God for that promise! But the inverse is also true. The person who is not in Christ, who does not believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, is condemned to eternal hell already. By the way, it does not get any easier to accept Christ, to trust Him as Lord and Savior as one gets older. In fact statistically it gets harder. A Barna Research study from several years ago says that the vast majority of those who are saved experienced their conversion during childhood – prior to age 14. It goes on to say that a person who is unsaved at the age of 14 has ony a 10% chance of being saved during the course of their life. That’s so scary! If a person rejects Christ now they are literally playing with fire – the fires of hell. There is no middle ground. Either a person believes what Jesus said about Himself or they don’t. And if they don’t then they are condemned already!

READ John 3:19-20. Jesus tells us the reason why most people don't believe. He says they don't believe because they love their sin. They love darkness. Every time I read verse 20 it reminds me of the way roaches or mice react whenever you turn the light on. They scatter. They run and hide. Expose people to the light of God's truth, His word and they don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear how what they are doing is wrong. “Hey everyone is doing it” or “It's no big deal.” Really? So what does God’s word have to say about it? Sin is sin no matter what sort of spin you want to put on it or how you want to package it. Oh, and just because a society accepts certain behavior does not mean that it is not sin.

It is tragic that people love darkness...but they do. In Romans 1:32 Paul describes sinful humanity. He says, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." It is not that people out in the world do not understand. They know the truth, but they love their sin more than they have a fear of God and His judgment. They don’t believe. Why don't they believe? Because they love their sin. People hate the light. There's no ignorance in Romans Chapter 1. No ignorance, just a love of darkness.

Well, having told Nicodemus how to be saved, Jesus closes the conversation with an invitation. READ John 3:21. Jesus says, “The true believer, the one who does the truth, basks in the light because the light shows that their works are godly works.” His invitation to Nicodemus and to all people is this: “Come to the light, come to Jesus.” God's invitation to accept the gift of salvation which leads to eternal life is open to everyone. “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13).

Practical application: Go tell someone!