

## How Can These Things Be?

John 3:9-21

How do you preach on a verse like John 3:16? Everywhere you turn, it seems that even when the knowledge of God is disappearing and the understanding of his word emptied of anything profound, you still find this awareness of John 3:16. People who know little or nothing about the Bible still seem to know about John 3:16. And Christians who are separated from one another by all sorts of religious labels and theological convictions, all still seem to be united in this one verse.

And the words “John 3:16” have become, themselves, the proclamation of the good news. Often at a large public sporting event, among all the signs and placards people carry, you will find those familiar words, “John 3:16.” And even the television cameras, which hide themselves from any devout display of religion or godliness, will show you the person carrying that famous sign, “John 3:16.”

So how do you study a verse like that? Well, the same as you would study any other verse, by starting with its context. John 3:16 is horribly misused, and misquoted, when it is quoted in isolation from all that Jesus said. And he has said a lot. And the message of the gospel which we so commonly call evangelism says a lot. A lot more than John 3:16, a lot more than the bare announcement “that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.”

That biblical announcement of God’s love, which we come to in our study of John’s gospel this morning, comes in a great a context, a context that begins with the announcement of God’s judgment. Indeed, as we find in John 3, in Jesus’ words to Nicodemus which we would rightly call an evangelistic encounter,

the message of the gospel, the call of evangelism, begins with a judgment. A rebuke.

### **I. THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL BEGINS WITH A REBUKE TO THOSE WHO REFUSE TO BELIEVE.**

It is a rebuke spoken by Jesus in response to Nicodemus confused questioning,

v.9

“How can these things be?” He just can’t understand what Jesus has said about being born again. He just can’t understand how a person can be born a second time, since a man obviously enter into his mother’s womb a second time. He cannot understand, therefore, what Jesus is saying about how a man enters the kingdom of heaven.

And he is to be blamed for that ignorance! He should have known, after all, he was the teacher of Israel!

v.10

In his blindness, Nicodemus refused to believe what Jesus had to say,

v.11

What is the barrier for Nicodemus? What keeps him from understanding? We saw it last week. It was his Phariseeism, his external religious zeal that gave him the security that he was a child of God. But that external religious zeal was inadequate, for it was steeped in hypocrisy. It was only external. He was, in Jesus’ later words, a white washed tomb, those “which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”

His external, religious zeal was nothing more than self-

righteous legalism, and he should have known that no man is able to come to God in his own strength or righteousness. He should have known that external legalism was an inadequate path to come to God. But it was that same external legalism that blinded him. And so Jesus here gives,

**A. A rebuke to those who self-righteous legalism keeps them spiritually blind.**

We read that rebuke in,  
v.10-12

Jesus speaks with such authority, such confidence in verse 11. “We speak what we know.” He knows the truth, the truth about eternal life. The truth about God. And he starts at that very point. He is no longer dialoging with Nicodemus. He is preaching to him. It’s not a conversation but a proclamation. A declaration of the truth, which Jesus knows because of the perfect intimacy of his relationship with his heavenly father. Jesus says, “[We] testify what we have seen.”

Nicodemus had no such knowledge. His was such a shallow, inadequate knowledge, based upon his own earthly, human perceptions.

v.2 “We know that you are a teacher come from God.”  
For he saw the signs.

But there is such blindness. Such spiritual blindness. From one who was the religious teacher in Israel. That blindness is so well identified in,  
v.12

Now, what are the “earthly things” which Jesus had told Nicodemus? One commentator notes that they are the things, which though heavenly in character and origin, take place on

earth. Namely, regeneration. Being born again. The “earthly things” are the things which take place in the realm of man’s experience. Jesus isn’t telling Nicodemus about the eternal decree of God, he’s not speaking about the doctrine of God at all. Nothing about a description of the God of heaven, just the earthly experiences of Nicodemus.

And it should have been immediately obvious to Nicodemus, as it should be to every man, that a man cannot please God and obtain his own salvation on the basis of his own external good works.

Because they are not good enough. They are not perfect. And every man ought to see that in himself, in his own experience. It should be apparent to every man that the only way for his relationship with God to be restored is for God to change his heart, for every man, if he were honest in self-examination, would recognize the wickedness of his own heart.

In other words, Nicodemus should have realized that he was a sinner who had fallen short of the glory of God. He should have known, in his own earthly experience, that he was not worthy of eternal life and could not earn it by somehow atoning for his own sins.

But of course, self-righteous legalism makes you blind to that knowledge. Self-righteous legalism makes you think that you aren’t separated from God by your sins. And so Jesus would say to the church of Laodicea,

Rev.3:17 Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ --and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your

nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.”

Likewise we read Jesus’ response to the Pharisees who questioned his eating with “sinners,”

Mat.9:12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 "But go and learn what this means: `I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

But the self-righteous legalism of Nicodemus kept him blind to the truth. And so it is still today! One great barrier to the gospel is man’s own thought that he can get to heaven by doing good, by living a good life and doing good works. And the message of the gospel is a rebuke to that idea.

Secondly, we see in this text,

### **B. A rebuke to those who specifically reject the truth of Jesus Christ.**

Indeed, that rebuke is a judgment. A condemnation.  
v.18

The promise of the gospel is the promise of,

Roman 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

The great freedom of the gospel is the freedom from condemnation. And those who reject the truth are condemned for their unbelief. And as Jesus puts it, the gospel doesn’t condemn them. They are condemned already. They who have not believed in the name of Jesus.

And that needs to be a part of the message of the gospel. That needs to be a part of our evangelism, indeed, the foundation of it. The proclamation to people in their unbelief that they stand under the sentence of condemnation because of their unbelief. The proclamation of the good news rightly begin with the proclamation of the bad news! Unbelievers are, by nature, children of wrath, subject to God’s wrath and curse as the just penalty for their unbelief.

And Jesus gives that rebuke to Nicodemus for his unbelief. Then, there is,

### **C. A rebuke to those whose love of their own sin causes them to hate the truth.**

Jesus now reaches down to the depth of a man’s heart. And he reveals the answer to the question, “Why?” “Why do people refuse to believe?” “Why do people reject the truth of the gospel?” “Why do people resist and rebel against the promise of eternal life to those who will believe in Jesus Christ?”

There is a simple and easy to understand answer to that question. They love their sin, and any faithful proclamation of the gospel will call people to repentance, to turn away from their sin. And so we read Jesus’ judgment,

v.19-20

That’s why people refuse to believe the gospel. That’s why people reject the free offer of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Because they love their sins. For some people, that’s obvious. And even spoken. For some, it is just below the surface of their own awareness, but it is still the root of their unbelief.

v.20

And so the message of the gospel begins with a rebuke. A pronouncement of condemnation. But then,

## **II. THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL CALLS US TO BELIEVE IN THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST.**

Eternal life is offered to those who will believe.

v.15

And, v.16

So the basic prerequisite for eternal life is belief. You must believe. Now, don't get sidetracked or confused into thinking that there is any merit in your act of believing, or that believing is itself a good work. It isn't. Believing is the act of receiving the gift. It is the commitment to accept what is offered, not the basis upon which the gift is offered. It is an act of trust, to embrace that which is freely offered.

And it is the focus of scriptural exhortations.

Acts 16:31 "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

Or,

Rom.10:9 "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

But what do you have to believe? And what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ? I've used the phrase, "to believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ." His person and his work.

Let's look first at his person. Who is Jesus? And what do you have to believe about him?

v.13

Remember verse 12, where Jesus speaks of "heavenly things"

compared with "earthly things." The "earthly things" are the personal experiences of men here on earth. Most especially the experience of being born again. The "heavenly things" are the things that reveal God, the knowledge of God that would be a mystery to us unless God himself revealed it.

And what we must believe is that revelation from God. The things of the spirit, the mind of God. We read in,

1 Cor. 2:14 "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. 16 For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ."

The mind of Christ is revealed in Scripture. The mind of God. We come to know what God is like by reading what he has revealed about himself in Scripture. And whatever you read about God in the Scripture, you must believe.

That is the "heavenly things" of verse 12. But notice verse 13 again. Notice what it says about Jesus Christ. "No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven." No one, no man, has ascended to heaven in order to get the heavenly things. No man has ascended to heaven and found out who God is and what he is like. And then come back and told us. No one has done that. In other words, we cannot fashion our image of God based upon our own ideas of what we think he is like, or what we would like him to be.

Instead, one came down from heaven to tell us about God. One came down from heaven to reveal to us who God is and what he is like. As verse 13 ends, "That is, the Son of Man who is in heaven."

So what do you have to believe, in order to be saved? You have to believe that Jesus Christ was in heaven with God the father, and that he came down to earth, in the flesh, to reveal the nature of God to us.

As this whole gospel began,

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

And then,

John 1:18 “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

So what do you have to believe? That,

**A. Jesus Christ is the incarnate second person of the godhead.**

That’s a technical way of saying that Jesus Christ is God, in the flesh. That he is God, the second person of the trinity, or the godhead. And that as God, he became a man. He became flesh and dwelt among us.

No vague awareness of God will do. Saving faith means that you believe in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture. That he is God! That he became man. And that he, alone, reveals the nature and mind of God.

v.13

But you also have to understand what he did. You have to understand his work. And what was that work? What did Jesus

do? In the words of verse 14, he was lifted up.

v.14-15

The son of man was lifted up. Lifted up in public view, put in such an eminent place so as to be open to everybody’s view. And above all else, Christ was lifted up, as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, when he was lifted up upon the cross. John records Jesus’ words in,

John 12:31 "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. 32 "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." 33 This He said, signifying by what death He would die. 34 The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how can You say, `The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?"

Jesus was talking about his death upon the cross, as the final judgment upon Satan, the ruler of this world. For when Jesus was lifted up, upon the cross, paying the penalty for sins, surely then he drew all peoples to himself. In salvation. Indeed, there is no other way to be saved. “The Son of Man must be lifted up.”

And so to have eternal life, you must believe that,

**B. The work of Jesus Christ is the only possible way to obtain eternal salvation.**

v.14-15

But believing isn’t merely bare intellectual knowledge. It is believing with your whole life. And so,

**C. Believing the truth includes doing the truth.**

Faith and life go together. And John frequently uses that phrase, “doing the truth.”

v.21

That's saving faith! It is the whole-souled acceptance of what Jesus has revealed about God. It is the commitment of your whole life to embrace that which is found in the inspired Scriptures because it is true! It is the faithful, consistent determination not merely to accept a set of facts, like you might believe that 2 plus 2 equals 4. Rather, it is the total surrender of your whole life, that you might live in the light of God, in his view. It is the commitment to give you life to God so that your life can be clearly seen by God, and approved by God. For you live your life in his strength and power.

v.21

There is no self-righteousness there. There is no works-salvation. No legalism. No sense of earning or deserving something. Rather, the simple realization that your life is lived in God's presence, and that he enables you to do all this good and right.

Our Confession puts it this way, "By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acting differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commandments, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come."

That's faith. Doing the truth! Believing it. And doing it.

And so, the message of the gospel calls us to believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Here is the faithful preaching of the Bible, from,

Acts 4:10 "Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of

Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 "This is the `stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved! I want that exhortation to be heard loudly and clearly by everyone in my hearing. And I lay that exhortation upon you. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!"

But one final thought. Look again at that most familiar verse, v.16

Let me end simply by speaking about the focus of the gospel. And that focus is not, ultimately, upon man. The focus of John 3:16 is not upon those who believe, but upon God who has loved them. And the greatest good of preaching salvation is not so that unbelievers will be saved! That's not the highest end of our evangelism. The highest end, the chief purpose of our evangelism is so that God's grace can be magnified and glorified through the salvation of sinners.

In other words, God's saves us for his own glory! For the manifestation, the demonstration of his own love. As is so obvious in the words of John 3:16,

### **III. THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL FOCUSES UPON THE GRACIOUSNESS OF GOD'S LOVE.**

The emphasis of that verse is God's love, his love that moved him, stirred him, motivated him, to save you.

v.16

It's always useful to think about God's motive. God's motive in your salvation. Why?

Let me ask two questions, two related questions. When did God first love? And, "Why?" Why did he love us? Why did he choose to love us? The answer lies within God himself. The motivation for God's work of salvation is the graciousness of his own love!

**A. God's own love is the motivation for his plan of salvation.**

Not our own goodness! Why did God send Jesus to save us from our sins?

Rom.5:8 "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

And,

Titus 3:4 "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

And perhaps most clearly of all,

1 John 4:8 "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

God's own love is the motivation for his plan of salvation, and that leaves you with only one appropriate response!

Eph.1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."

Or,

1 Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice."

That's the application of doctrine of God's eternal love--to love God in response. To sing his praise for loving you. For worshiping him and loving him, because he first loved you.

That so thoroughly strips away any sense of our own merit or good works. It so thoroughly strips us of all pride and self-righteousness. And leaves nothing but gratitude.

"Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus. Love of every love the best. Tis an ocean vast of blessing, tis a haven sweet of rest. O the deep, deep love of Jesus. Tis a heaven of heavens to me, and it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to thee."

God's love is the motivation for his plan of salvation. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

And directly connected with that love is God's grace. Grace is, of course, unmerited favor. Grace is a gift. Something that we do not deserve, and cannot earn. And the great message of our

text this morning, even beyond it's call to salvation, is its declaration of the glory of God's grace.

**B. God's grace is the basis for his own choice to save rather than condemn the world.**

v.16-17

The purpose of God's plan of salvation was to keep people from perishing, to give them eternal life. Perishing is, of course, defined in verse 17 as condemnation. Judgment to an eternal punishment in hell. And God's purpose, God's plan, was to save rather than condemn.

And the basis of that choice is entirely and completely a matter of grace!

Indeed, there are those who will be judged. Those who will be condemned. Rightly, and justly. They will be condemned for their sin, as they deserve.

v.18-19

But God so loved us, that he would rescue us from that condemnation. And he did all of it for his own glory.

Eph.2:7 "...that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

And we are left to do nothing else but worship the God of grace who has loved us with an everlasting love. We love him, because he first loved us.