

Sunday Sermon: March 11, 2018

Sermon Text: John 3: 14-21

Sermon Theme: What is the Message of the Bible? Jesus Tells us Himself.

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

If you wanted to know what the message of the Bible was, where would you go? If you wanted to know what the Bible said, where would you look? Maybe you would ask a religious friend or relative. Maybe you would go to a Christian bookstore and pick up the Bible for Dummies or another title that has all the answers. Maybe you would email a pastor and ask him what the Bible said.

There is a better answer. If you want to know what the Bible says, or what the message of the Bible truly is, why don't you ask Jesus?

In school, we learned that the best source for historically accurate information is the primary source. The primary source is the person who actually said the quote and not the person who repeated it. A primary source is someone who actually did the historical act and not the person who talked about it.

We have a great blessing that the Bible is God's Word. In that Word, we hear our Savior explain to us, in his own words, what he has done for us. In the Word of God before us this morning, we hear the message of the Bible from Jesus' own mouth. Jesus shows us the message of the Bible has two parts, the Law and the Gospel.

The question from the introduction are very common questions. These were the same questions that were on the mind and heart of a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus had been raised in the traditions of the Jewish religion. He observed the Law and tried to follow that Law to save himself. However, when Jesus came preaching that he was the Messiah who had come to forgive the sins of the repentant, Nicodemus, like many other Jewish people, questioned who was preaching the correct message of God's Word, Jesus or the Rabbis?

Nicodemus probably asked many of his Pharisee friends what they thought of Jesus. He probably went to the priests and the experts in the Law for some answers, but in the end, we see he came to the place where he needed to be. He came to Jesus to ask him what all of this actually meant.

Jesus began his answer by correcting Nicodemus' about the Law and what it was supposed to do. He uses the picture of the bronze serpent which was our Old Testament reading today. The lesson of the snakes in the desert and the bronze serpent was a very common lesson for the Jews. It included a built-in moral, follow God and nothing bad will happen, don't follow God and he will punish you.

The Jews believed that the Law served these two purposes, to justify the good and to destroy the bad. This teaching is not exclusive to the Jews, it is a very common view of the Law and morality in general. If you are good and follow a set of standards, whether that be God's Law, the Koran, or your own set of values, everything will be fine for you. As long as you are good, whatever god there is out there has to be good to you. But, if you sin against God in those bad ways that sinners do, look out because God will punish you and send you to hell.

There is a big problem with thinking that the Law is something that we can abide by and follow to earn God's love. The problem is we can't do it. God's definition of following his Law and being good enough are clear, Be Perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. If we do not continue to do everything found in the book of the Law we will be condemned.

When I was little, we would play a game in the snow called Fox and Hound. The rules were simple, we would make several paths in the snow that were all connected. The foxes and hounds were supposed to follow those paths and only those paths as they chased each other around trying to be caught or avoid being caught.

The problem was, people broke the rules by not following the paths. It didn't take long before people were trying to jump from one path and not quite getting there. It wasn't long before the corners of the paths had gotten really big because people were cutting them all the time, and it wasn't long before new trails began to appear.

If we are trying to make ourselves right by trying to follow God's laws we will end up like my friends and I when we were playing fox and hound. We will try to bend the rules about sin so that we look better, we will try cut the corners of God's Law so that our sins don't look that big, or we will widen or narrow God's definition of sin to justify our own sin. When we look God's path, we will realize we have tried to make our own paths instead of following his.

Jesus taught Nicodemus that the Law was not there to justify the good and punish the bad. Instead, Jesus shows Nicodemus that the Law is there to show us our sins and, when we see those sins, to see we need help, a Messiah, Savior. ¹⁴ **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** ¹⁵ **that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**

Jesus takes this common misunderstood teaching and turns it into an opportunity to teach Nicodemus the truth of God's love. The serpent was not lifted up to damn some and to save others, the serpent was lifted up for the same reason that Jesus was lifted up on the cross, that all might be saved.

The people who were bitten could have ignored their bites, they could have overlooked them, they could have tried a home remedy, or they could have looked for other ways to be saved. However, God gave them the one remedy for all their bites that would save them. Believe in his promise, look to the serpent and be saved.

God wants us to see our sins too, to repent of that sin and to know the forgiveness that is ours through Jesus. Instead, we try to ignore our sin, overlook them, or use our own remedy. None of these will work, just as none of them worked for the Israelites in the desert. Our God has given us the one answer to all of our sins. Believe in my promise. Believe in the promise that I have fulfilled in Jesus to take away your sins and you will be saved.

This was a new message to Nicodemus, one he had not heard before. Jesus continues to teach him the message of the Bible by showing him God's grace and mercy in the Gospel. ¹⁶ **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** ¹⁷ **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** ¹⁸ **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

Jesus switches from one misunderstanding to another. He switches from the misunderstanding of the Law to the misunderstanding of the Messiah. The Jews believed that the Messiah would be the ultimate judge who would carry out the Law. The Messiah would condemn the Gentiles and save the Jews. This simplistic view of the Savior is one that many others have as well. The Savior will save the good and destroy the evil.

Jesus goes a completely different direction with the Good News of the Gospel. This Gospel is so far from any of our man-made ideas about following God's Law and being saved that many people don't believe it. But listen to Jesus speak about this wonderful message, the message of the whole Bible. **For God so loved the world** God loved this sinful world. Not part of it, all of it. **That he sent his one and only Son.** God did not play favorites and send Jesus for some and not for others, instead Jesus came to take away the sins of the whole world. Everyone is on equal footing, all are sinners, but Jesus came to take the sins of all on himself.

There are two things that can happen with this wonderful gift that Jesus gives. Either people believe in Jesus as their Savior or they do not. **That whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.** In the first case, if people believe that Jesus has done what he says he has done, the eternal victory of heaven awaits. However, if we do not believe that message and choose to follow our own way, we stand condemned already because we have called our Savior and our God a liar after he has told us the way to heaven.

Here is where many would say that God is not loving or that God is terrible for not saving everyone. But, God never forces his salvation upon us. God is not like a parent who tries to punish us into good behavior or who makes us eat our vegetables for our own good. God does not punish us, cajole us, or force us into believing. What he does do is show us his love to us. He sent his Son that all might be saved and he sends his Word out every day. He sends out the Holy Spirit where that Word is preached and taught.

Out God is eternally loving and patient with us. He continues to call to us and send the Holy Spirit through his Word to work faith in our hearts. It is only when the Holy Spirit is at work that we can say I believe in Jesus and what he has done for me. In our second lesson, the Apostle Paul shows us just how amazing the love of God actually is. 5 times he tells us that our salvation is all to God's glory. Did you catch those 6 times when that

lesson was read ? It is by God's **grace** you have been saved (1), through **faith** (2), this is **NOT** from yourselves (3), it is the **gift of God** (4), not by works (5), so that no one can boast.

Instead of two separate messages, the Law and the Gospel make up one continuous message that plays over and over throughout our life. The Holy Spirit works through the Law to show us our sins and need for a Savior. When we see our sins, whether they are pointed out by a friend, a family member, a pastor or an elder, we don't hide them, rationalize them, or go our own way. The Law is there to show us that we have sin in our lives and to show we need help with that sin. This is where the Gospel is such a comfort. The Gospel shows sinners that we do have help. That help comes from Jesus who took our sins to the cross. Jesus doesn't say I forgive you, but..... Jesus own words say that those who believe in him are not condemned but have eternal life.

How do we respond to Jesus' wonderful message? Will we sin because we are forgiven? Will we hold onto those sins because Jesus gives us a pass? Or will we repent of our sins and live a new life to thank Jesus for what he has done?

The answer is as clear. Those who believe, who are thankful for the forgiveness that Jesus has given to them, no longer walk in the darkness of sin, but in the light of the forgiveness and love that Jesus has given to them.

This is the message of the Bible: For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.