

From Darkness to Light: John 3:17-21
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I read of a man who took a tour through a famous and historic art gallery. It held many masterpieces by some of the greatest artists of all times. When the tour concluded, the visitor remarked to the attendant, “Well, I don’t think much of your old pictures.” The attendant answered quietly, “Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are.”

Those pieces of art had stood the test of time. The opinion of this ignorant visitor wasn’t going to diminish their reputation. The visitor’s remark did nothing to tarnish the greatness of those masterpieces, but it only made evident his own blindness. In turning away from the beauty of those pictures, he made more of a statement about himself than he did about the artwork.

Our passage from John 3 today portrays Jesus Christ, the coming into the world, in a way similar to those masterpieces in the art gallery. Those who have eyes to see the greatness of Jesus Christ will believe in Him and be saved. They will come to the light, and their deeds will be enlightened by the truth, by the grace of God. But those who are blind to His greatness, who turn away from the light and instead continue to love the darkness, they will not believe. Their deeds will be evil and wicked, and they will be condemned.

If you are a Christian, you have come from darkness to light. You have been transferred from a life of loving the darkness and hating the light, to a life of hating the darkness and loving the light. That’s a pretty radical change! It’s a complete 180.

One of the things this passage helps us to see is the fundamental role of desire. What you love and what you hate is going to have a pervasive influence on your actions, your attitudes, on whether you believe or do not believe, on whether your deeds are evil or good, and whether you are condemned or saved.

I want to briefly point out several contrasts that are made in these verses, and then we’ll look a bit deeper into a couple of the biblical the theological themes expressed here.

Salvation vs. Condemnation

Beginning in verse 17, the first contrast we see is between condemnation and salvation. This is expanding on the wonderful verse we studied last Sunday. John 3:16, such a great summary of the Gospel. I preached the entire sermon last week on that one verse. We studied it phrase by phrase. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believe in him

should not perish but have eternal life.” What a powerful display of the love of the Father, the love of the Son, the sacrifice that was made in order to save sinners. Whoever believes in Jesus will not be condemned to hell but will be saved unto eternal life.

Verse 17 continues to emphasize this love, the loving intention of the Father and the Son. God didn’t send His Son into the world mainly as a judgment, as a condemnation. That was not the heart of God, that was not the heart of Jesus, in the incarnation. The incarnation is about love. It’s about salvation. It’s about rescuing people from condemnation.

Belief vs. Unbelief

The contrast between condemnation and salvation is tied to the next contrast, which is between belief and unbelief. Verse 18, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” As we saw last week in verse 16, salvation is for whoever believes. All those who believe will be saved. They will not perish but will have eternal life.

What we’re seeing in these verses that follow is the contrast between salvation for all who believe and condemnation for all who do not believe.¹ All those who believe are saved. But those who do not believe are condemned.

So although judgment was not the primary purpose of Jesus’ coming, there is judgment that happens. Those who refuse to believe, who love the darkness and hate the light, they remain under condemnation. We sense a bit of tension here, since verse 17 clearly stated that God didn’t send His Son into the world to condemn the world. But then in verse 18 we read of those who are condemned and in verse 19 of judgment.

The thrust of the passage seems to be an emphasis on God’s love, on God’s grace, on Jesus’ love and sacrifice, and the lavish gift offered to all who believe. The sad reality, though, is that not all believe. And therefore, even though Jesus coming to earth is mainly about salvation to all who believe, there is also the reality of judgment for those who refuse to believe.

John Piper has a helpful insight regarding the judgment spoken of in this text: “There is a kind of judgment that came into the world when the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came into the world, and this judgment reveals that the guilt of not coming to Jesus lies in the heart of man, and the grace of coming to Jesus comes from the heart of God.

¹ Leon Morris, “These are the two sides to the one coin. Jesus came to bring salvation, but the very fact of salvation for all who believe implies judgment on all who do not.” (*John*, 205)

The coming of Jesus into the world clarifies that unbelief is our fault, and belief is God's gift. . . . Which means that if we do not come to Christ but instead perish, we magnify God's justice. And if we do come to Christ and gain eternal life, we magnify God's grace."²

Can you see that in the way this passage describes salvation and condemnation, belief and unbelief? Salvation is connected to God's love extended freely to all who believe. Condemnation is connected to human unbelief. You can see that in verse 19 in the description of what the judgment is. The judgment is that when the light comes into the world (for the purpose of salvation, as we know from verse 17), the accompanying result is that people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. And thus they are condemned.

That leads to 3 more contrasts, which I'll mention very briefly.

Light vs. Darkness

Verse 19, *the light* has come into the world, and people loved *the darkness* rather than *the light*. Verse 20, everyone who does wicked things hates *the light* and does not come to *the light* . . . Verse 21, whoever does what is true comes to *the light* . . .

Love vs. Hate

Verse 19, people *loved* the darkness rather than the light . . . Verse 20, everyone who does wicked things *hates* the light and does not come to the light . . . Verse 21, whoever does what is true *comes to* the light . . . There are these deep and intense desires within our souls that either repel us away from the light or propel us toward the light. There are these deep desires that move us, literally, in our actions and attitudes – love and hate, directed one way or the other in relation to light and darkness – this will determine the course of our lives both now and for eternity.

“True” works vs. “Wicked / Evil” Works

Verse 19, people loved the darkness rather than the light because their *works were evil*. Verse 20, For everyone who *does wicked things* hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his *works* should be exposed. Verse 21, But whoever *does what is true* comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his *works* have been carried out in God.

Our actions are an outworking of our desires. Those who remain in a state of loving darkness and hating the light will continue to produce wicked, evil actions. They stay in the darkness reveling in their dark deeds. But those who have been

² Piper, sermon on John 3.

changed by the power of God, who have been born again to new life, our desires have been changed, resulting in different actions and attitudes. Loving the light we are drawn more and more into the light. And as our works are conformed more and more into Christ-like deeds, it becomes clear that these actions are fruit of God's work. That's what the end of verse 21 is saying. Those who are doing what is true, our actions conform to God's truth and are an evidence of God's grace. Notice here that truth is not something one merely agrees to intellectually. Truth is something that shapes your everyday life. The truth that has gotten ahold of you and transformed you, it works itself out in your daily behavior. Whoever does what is true comes to the light. And those actions shaped by the truth are evidence that God is carrying out that work within you.

From Light to Darkness

Well, I've quickly covered these key contrasts in the passage. Now I want to step back and take a broader look at these themes from a biblical and theological standpoint. We'll start at the beginning asking the question, Where did this hostility start? Where did this love for the darkness and hatred for the light begin? When did humanity fall into this darkness? Well, it started in the garden when Adam and Eve, who were basking in the bright light of God's favor gave in to the dark temptations of the evil one. Genesis 3 is such a pivotal chapter in the Bible, because it records the fall of mankind into sin. Adam and Eve had enjoyed the beauty of life in the garden. There was peace and harmony in that first marriage, and in the whole order of God's creation. But then the tempter came, and Eve was drawn in by his words. She ate of the forbidden fruit, and gave some to Adam as well, who was with her. And then the two of them experienced a very rude awakening. In their lust for autonomy and self-sufficiency, they had envisioned becoming like God. They thought there would be great delight in rejecting God's Kingship over their lives. They expected excitement and power and independence. Just like the expectations we all have when we're lured into sin. We think, "Oh, this will be so satisfying. This will give me pleasure, or power, or independence." But sin never lives up to its promises.

Their eyes were opened, as it says in Genesis 3:7. The first thing they experienced after eating of the fruit was shame. Talk about anti-climactic. They ate of the fruit thinking, "We're going to be like God." And immediately after they ate, they were struck with an overwhelming sense of self-consciousness and shame. In chapter 2:25, before the Fall, it said, "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed," but after the Fall they were both very much ashamed. The shame of their sin produced a

desire to conceal their nakedness. They wanted to cover themselves up.

So they “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.” Adam and Eve thought they could fix the problem themselves. They thought they could do some work and cover over the offense and the guilt and the shame. And ever since mankind has been attempting the same kind of thing. Instead of running to God in repentance and pleading for His forgiveness, we want flee into the darkness and try to handle things ourselves. I’ll fix the problem. I’ll cover the shame. I’ll take away the guilt. And as humans we have come up with all kinds of bizarre ideas about how to do this. Various religions and philosophies and psychologies have been constructed to take away our shame and guilt. But they are all fig leaves.

What can cover my sin? What can really bring us out of the shadows, out of hiding, back into the light of God’s presence? Only God can provide the covering needed to remove our guilt and shame. This is what He did for Adam and Eve. It says in Genesis 3:21, “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” These were not fig leaves. These were garments of skins. And since they were made of skins, it is understood that animals had to die. This was the first shedding of blood, the first physical deaths. Who should have died? Adam and Eve should have died because of their sin. But God had mercy on them, and instead Adam and Eve watched as God killed animals in order to clothe them with garments of skins.

This points to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and ultimately to the atoning death of Jesus Christ, whose blood was shed so that we may live. He went into the darkness of God’s wrath in order that we can be brought into the light. And Christ’s righteousness clothes us so that in the courtroom of God we are declared righteous in God’s sight as He sees us in union with Christ, covered in Christ’s sinless perfection.

So don’t trust in fig leaves of your own making. Look to the sacrifice which God has provided for us. And when you feel the shame of sin, don’t hide in the shadows. Don’t run away from the light because you’re scared of your evil deeds being exposed. Instead come to the light. Believe in the One who is the light. Your sins will be covered and you will be fully accepted into God’s presence.

Varieties of Darkness

My purpose in developing this point is so we won’t have a superficial stereotype of what it is to live in the darkness. Many people may appear to be living very moral, even very religious lives, and yet their morality and religion is actually an offense to

God. It is as foolish and silly as Adam and Eve trying to cover themselves with fig leaves and trying to hide from God. For those who are in the darkness, trying to cover themselves with morality and religion, they are fooling themselves if they think they are pleasing God. Their actions are just another outworking of their radical rebellion against God. It is another evidence of them hiding in the darkness, hating the light.

Now, how can that be? That may sound like an absolute contradiction. How is it that a “good” person, a moral person, a religious person, can be an enemy of God? How can it be that even their good works are, at root, rebellious?

What comes to mind when you think of wicked, evil deeds? Maybe you think of terrorists. Maybe you think of human traffickers. Maybe you think of thieves, murderers, and so on . . . It’s plain to see the wickedness in such examples.

But what about the Buddhist monk who does no harm to others, but spends time in meditation and pursues virtue? What about the Catholic priest who lives an upright life and faithfully carries out his duty to the church? What about the Baptist pastor who visits the sick and counsels and teaches the Bible? The shocking truth of Scripture is that any of these individuals may still be in the darkness. And if they remain in the darkness, they will be condemned.

I do hope that most Baptist pastors are truly saved, but I cannot assume that. The fact is, many people devote their lives to religious service of one kind or another, even without truly being born again, but simply because they want to feel good about themselves. Many people in this world will pursue a moral life, a life of service to others, a life that others will admire and applaud, but it’s not out of a true love for the God of the Bible. Instead, it’s fundamentally self-centered and self-gratifying and self-glorifying.

Think about it like this. Think about the child who obeys his parents, but with grumbling and rebellion in his heart. He’s cleaning his room simply to avoid punishment. And so on the surface, someone might say, “Oh, what an obedient child!” But the parent knows: he’s not being submissive. There is hostility there.

Or think of the employee who does exactly what the boss tells him to do, but all the while muttering curses under his breath. You might think that person is a good employee, and in many ways he might be. But others in the office know, that guy hates the boss with a vengeance. He just knows he has to do what he’s told, or he’ll lose his job.

Or think of the professional athlete who seems to have a good relationship with the coach. He speaks well of the coach in press conferences. He follows the coach’s instructions in the

game. He supports the team. But deep down, that player is motivated fundamentally by the applause of the crowd and the fat checks being deposited in his bank account.

These illustrations simply show that there can be outward obedience even if there is not an inward love and allegiance to a person. There is a lot of religion and morality in the world that, at its root, is self-glorifying rather than God-glorifying. It is not out of love for God, but is actually a manifestation of rebellion against God. It's not a love of the light, but actually hatred of the light and love for the darkness. Many people would flatter themselves with the assumption that they are pleasing God with their life. I'm sure everyone who believes in a deity would like to think that the deity is pleased with how they're conducting their life. But the person who is in spiritual darkness, whether a murderer or a monk, a human trafficker or a pastor . . . if a person is not truly born again, then it doesn't matter how cleaned up they may be on the outside. Their whole life is separated from God and at enmity with God. And therefore all the fruit of that person's life, even if it seems very sacrificial and beneficial to others, is nothing but filthy rags in God's sight. "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." (Isaiah 64:6, ESV)

Now I just want to put a footnote in here to clarify something. We are certainly grateful when an unbeliever helps others rather than murders others. We see the common grace of God in the world restraining evil and causing even unbelievers to invest their lives in ways that are beneficial to others. And so we give thanks to God for unbelievers who work in humanitarian organizations, who take in orphans, who help rebuild communities where disaster has hit, who give money to charity, who are nice to their neighbors, etc. There is a vast difference between the terrorist the aid worker, in terms of their effects in the world.

The point I want us to see about the darkness, about depravity, is that regardless of whether one's deeds are destructive or constructive in relation to other people, it doesn't necessary imply a difference in terms of that person's relationship with God. Everyone would agree that bad deeds are not pleasing to God. The surprising teaching of Scripture, as it reveals the depth of our sinful nature, is that even our good deeds are not pleasing to God if they don't come from a heart that loves the light and comes to the light.

Paul, in Philippians 3, describes how moral and religious he had been before he was converted. Paul himself is a striking example of the very thing we're talking about here. Listen to how he describes his own life of religious zeal. "though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the

eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” (Philippians 3:4–9, ESV)

What Paul previously considered great gain—how he excelled in religion—he now recognizes to be loss. All of his good works were actually a barrier between him and God, because it kept him from seeing his need for Jesus. He was outwardly very polished, very respectable, very moral and religious. But he was an enemy of God. He was in the darkness, hating the light. He was like Adam and Eve, putting on fig leaves to cover his shame, hiding from God. What Paul eventually came to recognize, by the grace of God, is that his righteous deeds were worthless. What he needed was to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. He needed to come into the light and let those prideful deeds be exposed for what they were, and be forgiven for them.

The reason I belabor that point is because I don’t want anyone to dismiss these weighty warnings. I don’t want us to read here about those whose works are evil, those who do wicked things, hating the light, and to think right away, “That’s not me. That never was me.”

The truth is, that was every one of us at one point in our lives. And for many here, that may still describe you. My simple point is, even if your life looks pretty cleaned-up on the outside, this may still describe your heart before God. Loving the darkness, concealing your selfish, rebellious deeds and attitudes, turning your back on God’s loving, gracious invitation to you to believe and be saved.

I hope you will believe and be saved today. I hope that God will cause you to be born again. And that’s the connection I want to make again in closing. Each of the contrasts in these verses points us back to what Jesus had said to Nicodemus earlier in this chapter. You must be born again!

From condemnation to salvation. From unbelief to belief. From darkness to light. From hatred of the light to loving the light and coming to the light. From wicked, evil deeds to deeds that conform to the truth. This is the night-and-day difference between being unregenerate and being regenerate. This is the transformation that comes with the new birth.

I'll draw out 2 application points for us in considering this radical contrast between darkness and light, keeping in mind that many here have been born of God and are now in the light whereas others here have not yet been born anew and therefore remain in darkness.

Worship

First of all, thinking of those who are born again. Regarding worship, as our mission statement says, we exist to delight in the beauty of God's greatness. That's worship. And that's what the truth of this passage ought to stir up in us. When we reflect on our salvation, when we realize the abyss from which God rescued us, the dark dungeon of sin that we loved to hide in, we ought to delight in the beauty of His greatness, that He is such a kind and merciful God. We were totally stuck. We were in complete bondage. We wanted to be there in that dungeon of sin. We were hostile toward Him and rebellious to the core. We loved the darkness and hated the light. But He overcame our rebellion, forgave our rebellion, and brought us into a life-changing relationship with Him. He brought us out of the darkness of condemnation and into the light of salvation.

Witness

The final part of our mission statement is that we exist to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. The teaching that we've seen here of the unbeliever's hostility toward God, loving the darkness and hating the light . . . this has a bearing on our evangelism, because we have to recognize that we are utterly dependent on the Spirit to bring about the new birth that is necessary. We must rely on the power of the Spirit. We must share the Word of God, the truth of God, we must shine the light, and pray that the Holy Spirit will break through the hard heart, taking out the heart of stone and replacing it with a heart that loves God. Regeneration is not something we can bring about. We certainly can't make it happen simply by creating the right atmosphere and giving just the right presentation. The new birth is a miracle of God. The desires deep down within a person must be radically changed. Hatred of the light must be changed to love for the light. And love of the darkness must be changed to hatred of the darkness. And only God's work of regeneration can effect such a fundamental change within us.

So in our evangelism we have to be aware of the fact that God has to do His work. It's not just a matter of us presenting a convincing argument. So a very practical point that flows out of this is that we pray for unbelievers. We pray to God concerning

evangelism. We pray for missions. We pray for spiritual awakening and revival. We pray for God to work in many lives to bring people to saving faith by overcoming hostility, by bringing people from darkness to light . . . as He has so graciously brought us from darkness to light.