



THE WORLD THAT KNOWS TOO LITTLE

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John 3:16-36

Eighth Message

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During a trial in a small Nebraska town, the local prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand. She was sworn in, asked if she would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, on the Bible, so help her God. The witness was a proper, well-dressed elderly lady, the grandmother type, poised and well spoken.

The prosecuting attorney approached the woman and asked, "Mrs. Jones, do you know me?" She responded, "Why, yes, I do know you, Mr. Williams. I've known you since you were a young boy, and frankly, you've been a big disappointment to me. You lie, cheat on your wife, manipulate people and talk badly about them behind their backs. You think you're a rising big shot when you haven't the sense to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pushing shyster. Yes, I know you quite well."

The lawyer was stunned. He couldn't even think for a few minutes. Then, he slowly backed away, fearing the looks on the judge and jurors' faces, not to mention the court reporter who documented every word. Not knowing what else to do, he pointed across the room and asked, "Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?" She replied, "Why, yes, I do. I've known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. He's lazy, bigoted, and has a bad drinking problem. The man can't build or keep a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire state. Not to mention the fact he cheated on his wife with three different women. Yes, I know him."

The defense attorney almost fainted and was seen slipping downward in his chair, looking at the floor. Laughter mixed with gasps thundered throughout the courtroom, and the audience was on the verge of chaos. At this point, the judge brought the courtroom to silence, called both counselors to the bench, and in a very quiet voice said, "If either of you morons asks her if she knows me, you're going to jail!"

This story describes how a lot people feel about attending church. They think that church is a place where struggles, sin and addictions are exposed and people are made to feel guilty and condemned. Church is the last place struggling people would go to for encouragement. They find it much more comforting in a bar with a sympathetic bartender, where everyone knows their name. That is a sad state of affairs. The only people whom Jesus exposed were those who felt too comfortable in church and were hiding behind religion.

With the release of the movie *The Passion of the Christ* it seems everyone is talking about Jesus. In light of this, and of the fact that we are approaching Easter, it's appropriate that we are studying the gospel of John. It's important that the truth of the gospel is clear in our minds and hearts, both for ourselves and for those with whom we might share it. After all the talk about religion and artistic expression in movies, everything comes down to the question, Who is Jesus? John's gospel presents the truth about Jesus so that we can share in his incarnation. I pray that this church is a place where people can enter without fear, a place where "everyone knows your name."

In our last study we met Nicodemus, the man who knew too much. He told Jesus, "We know that you come from God," but Jesus replied that Nicodemus didn't know anything, because he had to be born "from above." The rest of chapter 3 expands on this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. It sets out important truths, quite appropriately, for the world that knows too little. The chapter is structured as follows:

- 1-15 Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus
Birth from above
- 16-21 Discourse on eternal life
- 22-30 Dialogue between John the Baptist and his disciples
Groom from above
- 31-36 Discourse on eternal life

The two discourse sections are parallel. In fact, much of verses 11-21 is repeated in verses 31-36. Scholars debate whether Jesus or John is speaking here. If it is John, it's difficult to tell where he begins. These two sections probably are John's reflections. One indicator is the mention of the same phrase used in the prologue, "only begotten Son," in verse 16. John is a good preacher. He is conveying truth that he has hammered out as he has shared the gospel and answered people's questions. In the end it doesn't matter who is speaking, John or Jesus. Behind the words of both lies what the Holy Spirit had given them.

Because the two discourses are so similar we will take them together. We will look at the parallel ideas, and then examine John's further witness to Jesus.

I. Discourse on Eternal Life

"No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man." (John 3:13 NASB)

“He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.” (John 3:31)

The testimony of Jesus is authoritative, since he comes from heaven. “From above” is the same term that we saw last week, “born from above.” No one has ascended into heaven. Anyone who speaks about God other than Jesus is from the earth, and therefore does not have the full picture. Only the Son of Man has descended from heaven. But more than that, the fact that Jesus is from above means that he can offer life from above. No one on earth can give us life from above.

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” (3:17)

“For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.” (3:34)

Jesus did not come on his own initiative. John’s gospel will repeat over and over the fact that God sent his Son into the world. Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the one whom the Father sent.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.” (3:11)

“What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony.” (3:32)

The words “accept” in verse 11 and “receive” in verse 32 are the same. Jesus offers testimony of what he has seen and heard, but “no one receives his testimony.” The world rejects it. Some will receive it, however.

“He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.” (3:33-34)

The testimony of Jesus is in fact the very words of God, because Jesus has the Spirit of God. If one rejects his testimony, he is calling God a liar. If one receives his testimony, then he validates what God has said is true. The very fact that you are sitting here this morning professing faith in Jesus is testimony that God is true.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (3:16)

“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.” (3:35)

John 3:16 is probably the best known verse in the Bible. God sent his Son because of his love for both the world and the Son. He loved the world and so he gave his only begotten Son. He loved the Son and he gave all things to him. The phrase “only begotten Son” means one and only Son. It emphasizes the intensity of the love of God, and also stresses the greatness of the gift.

John devotes special attention to the love relationships among the Father, the Son, and the disciples:

The Father loves the son
The Son loves the Father
Jesus loves his own, his disciples
The disciples must love Jesus
The disciples must love one another
The Father loves the disciples.

The Father doesn’t just love his Son, or the elect, he loves the world, which is John’s term for those who are in opposition to God. Believers are chosen out of the world. The world is so wicked and anti-God that elsewhere John forbids Christians to love the world or anything in it. The love of God is not a consequence of the loveliness of humanity, but of the fact that God is love (1 John 4:16). God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big and it includes so many people, but because it is so bad. The love of God is what the world needs, even though it doesn’t know it.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (3:16)

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (3:36)

This truth brackets the text. If you believe in Jesus, you will not perish, but will have eternal life. If you do not believe, then you do not have life and you will experience the wrath of God. He who has the Son has the life. He who does not have the Son does not have the life. There are only two choices. It is a life-and-death decision. There is no third option. Eternal destiny is at stake. This is the most important choice anyone can make. It is really the only decision that matters in life. And it is not coerced. It must be accepted, and can be refused.

What are we to believe? The “for” in verse 16 looks back to the Son of Man who had to be lifted up on the cross, like the serpent in the wilderness, to become the very object of God’s wrath. Jesus is unique and universal. If we accept the notion that there are many different revelations and many different ways to God, then the human family has no unified center, and thus God is unknown and unknowable. But that is not the gospel. God has revealed himself in his Son. He has given him everything so that we can know him.

Two more truths are given that are stated only once:

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (3:17-18)

There is both salvation and judgment, but God’s priority is redemption. Jesus did not come into the world to pronounce judgment, even though he had that au-

thority. He did not come into a neutral world in order to save some and condemn others. He came into a world that was already lost and condemned. Most people understand this and expect that evil should be judged. They want that. The dying bad guy in the movie snarls, "I'll see you in hell." Not all of the world will be saved, but God's purpose was to bring salvation to the world.

Perhaps John is anticipating a question about God loving the world. If God so loves the world, then why would he judge anyone? Even though God is fundamentally love, he is also holy, and he must, by his very nature, judge sin. His love does not extinguish the fact of judgment. Apart from God's love for the world, every person would be under his wrath and no one would be saved. But God does not want to judge; he wants people to be saved from judgment—that is the point.

We see this in the Old Testament: "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord God, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?" (Ezek 18:23). God does not enjoy the idea of judgment. In fact he hates it. "Therefore I will wail for Moab, even for all Moab will I cry out" (Jer 48:31). We would expect God to wail for Israel, but he even wails for an enemy of his people.

This is where the church becomes confused and her reputation gets tainted. In the same way that Jesus didn't come to judge the world, so the church, at this point in time at least, is not God's instrument to judge the world. The world is already under judgment. That is all Jesus said. That is all we have to say. In order to be God's representatives we are here to offer eternal life. This doesn't mean that we ignore sin or take it lightly. It means that when people come to church they should not be made to feel condemned and guilty. They probably feel enough guilt already. Rather, they should be so attracted to the life of Jesus that they want to come to church.

"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." (3:19-21)

Here John returns to his prologue, referring again to light and darkness. The light has come into the world, a light that shone even more brightly than at the time of creation. However, men love the darkness, preferring to live without the knowledge of God. The reason people reject Jesus is primarily moral—their deeds are evil. They do not want them exposed because they feel shame and conviction. So we are not surprised when they refuse the light.

The alternative to darkness is light. Truth is the opposite of evil. The one who believes, the one who practices

truth, comes to the light and the light reveals that his or her deeds have been done by God. The one who loves the light does not find his confidence in righteous deeds, but in the fact that God has done it all. I realized that after I became a Christian. I saw how God had orchestrated the circumstances of my life to bring me to faith in Jesus. Here again is the contrast of two lives—those who love darkness and those who love light. There is no third option.

I know what it means to love the darkness, because I spent many years living in the darkness. No matter how appealing it appears, it is a horrible place to be. Having God's perspective and heart means aching for those who live in that darkness, and offering them light and life.

In these two discourses on eternal life John lays out truth in all its simplicity and profundity. These are simple words that we can contemplate for hours. This is why John's gospel is said to be a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.

In the middle of this discussion on eternal life we have a further witness of John.

II. John the Baptist's Further Testimony

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized—for John had not yet been thrown into prison. (3:22-24)

John states that both he and Jesus were baptizing. Jesus had been in Jerusalem before he went out into the Judean countryside. John is the only gospel writer who says that Jesus baptized, but in 4:2 he says that his disciples were the ones actually doing the baptizing.

John was also baptizing, in Aenon, near Salim, probably in Samaria. He had not yet been imprisoned; his ministry overlapped that of Jesus. John is the only one who indicates this. In the Synoptics, Jesus begins when John goes to prison; therefore chapters 2-4 of John take place earlier than anything in the Synoptics.

Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciple with a Jew about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease." (3:25-30)

When a discussion arises between John's disciples and a Jew about purification, they come to John and ask him about Jesus. The indication is that they are resentful and embittered. One can see differing groups and discern their attitudes towards one another, towards Jewish purification, John's baptism and Jesus' baptism. Is this how the Presbyterians, Baptists and Pentecostals compare themselves to each other? Who is doing things right? Who is attracting the most people? Who is superior?

John wants to leave no doubt in his followers that Jesus is superior in every way to him. He is not the Christ and he is not the bridegroom. He is the best man at the wedding. Just like the wedding at Cana, one can't miss the allusions to Israel being the bride of the Lord and a wedding feast being part of messianic expectations.

The best man organizes and presides over the wedding. His greatest joy comes in seeing the ceremony proceed without a problem. I have officiated at a lot of weddings, and I have never seen a best man try to steal the show from the bridegroom. The best man never says, "I do." He doesn't kiss the bride. He is the servant of the bride and groom. When they are united, he rejoices greatly. Being the best man fills John with joy. Even from the womb this was so. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leaped for joy in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

John recognizes that he cannot do anything unless God has given it to him. He doesn't feel the need to compete with or control someone else whom God is using. He knows that his ministry must decrease and Jesus must increase. John is content with his station in life. His role is to point people to Jesus and then get out of the way. All of life is a gift from heaven, and God's

sovereignty is behind all human affairs. Discontentment really is unbelief in the sovereignty of God.

John inserts this account between the two discourses on eternal life because he wants to highlight one of the major obstacles to people hearing and receiving the gospel and continuing to have life from above through the Spirit. That obstacle is the envy, jealousy, and comparing that occurs in the church between the disciples. Here in John 3 the beauty and clarity of the gospel is juxtaposed with the ugliness that can keep the church from accomplishing God's purpose.

We have much to learn from John and his perspective towards Jesus. How do we view people in the body, their gifts and calling? We should be excited about how God is using different ones in our midst, and elevate and encourage them. Are we content with how God has designed us, with our particular gifts and talents? It's important to know ourselves, to be content with who we are and how God uses us.

Is the church so busy competing with other churches and running a popularity contest that it fails in its mission for Jesus to increase in people's lives? The church loses its focus and becomes obsessed with size and success. Our ministry is to point people to Jesus. If God should use us in someone's life, then we should always look for Jesus to increase and ourselves to decrease.

We are surrounded with people who need Jesus. Nicodemus was the man who knew too much. The world is enslaved to darkness and knows too little. It is unaware of just how much God loves us and how much it cost him to bring salvation to mankind. Our mission is not to judge the world, but to offer eternal life to those who live in darkness.

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