

God's Love Gift to the World – John 3:16-21

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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I. INTRODUCTION

I was only 6 years old but I already had a deep, dark secret. I had done something I knew I shouldn't have done and my mind was racked with guilt and fear that I was now doomed for the bad choice I had made. I was pretty sure that if my parents found out what I'd done, they would be so angry and disappointed in me, they'd give me some severe discipline and would probably never treat me the same again. So I kept my secret. I hid what I had done and hoped no one would ever find out. But you know what? I couldn't get it off my mind. Oh, occasionally I'd forget about it for a while, but it would always come back to haunt me and I'd go back into my tailspin of worry and fear about what the consequences were going to be.

What terrible deed had I done? What was it that I was convinced would bring about the end of my parents love for me and send my life into a tailspin? I had smoked a cigarette. Well, I'd taken one puff and then had a coughing fit. But to my 6 year old mind, this was it. Not only had I done something I knew was wrong, but now I was guaranteed to get lung cancer. And so I kept my secret. I refused to bring it into the light. I hid it in the dark and worried endlessly about how guilty I was and how short my life was going to be. I was stuck and miserable and unaware that I was believing lies and missing the simple path to freedom and peace.

Well, this is a childish example of how all people in the world, including you and I, tend to deal with wrong things we've done and bad choices we've made. We hide them, fearing condemnation and judgment and loss of love. And hidden in the dark, they eat us up inside and keep us miserable, guilt-ridden, and unable to find freedom and forgiveness. But did you know that God sees us in the dark places we hide. The darkness is as light to him. He already knows all the details of what we've done. And he loves us there in the dark and feels mercy towards us and wants to show us how to get out. We're going to see how true this is

today in our study of Scripture, and to what great lengths God is willing to go to rescue us from the dark places we hide.

Turn with me in your Bibles to John, chapter 3, where today we'll be focusing on verses 16 through 21. If you'll remember from last week, Jesus is talking with Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who has come to him by night to find out who Jesus is and what God's doing through him. Let's read verses 1 through 15 to remind ourselves what's happened so far in this conversation:

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water AND the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus is giving Nicodemus much more than he bargained for. He's already made it clear that nothing less than a spiritual re-birth by the power of God's Holy Spirit is necessary for people to see and enter God's kingdom, and that belief in the lifted up Son of Man, Jesus, is the key to possessing eternal life in God's kingdom. Now

he's going to expound more on this gift of eternal life through the Son and how it works. Let's read verses 16 through 21:

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

II. GOD'S LOVE GIFT

The first thing we notice in these verses is God's love for the world. It was God's deep love for sinful, perishing, rebellious people that motivated him to do something to rescue them. Even though the people whom he created and for whom he every day and night provides life and breath and everything they need to survive...even though they act as if he doesn't exist, constantly do things that are wrong and out of step with his character, and worship and serve anything but him...even so, he loves them deeply and faithfully like a good father does his own child and is willing to do whatever it takes to rescue them and restore them to life and connected relationship with him. And this perfect love of a perfect Father moved him to give to the world the greatest love gift ever given: his only Son.

Can you imagine anything more precious than your only child? I recently watched a movie called, "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories from the Kindertransport." It's a documentary about a rescue plan for Jewish children during the Holocaust. People from England had offered to serve as foster parents for Jewish children, so Jewish parents in Germany would put their children on a train bound for England, knowing that was likely the only chance for their children to survive what Hitler was doing to the Jews.

But just watching and listening to testimonies about the agony the parents went through in putting their kids on a train to be delivered to strangers, knowing they would likely never see them again, was excruciating. And even worse was picturing my own kids, Hailey and Isaac, in that situation...how scared they would be and how hard it would be to let them go. One father in the movie was holding his daughter's hands through the window of the train as it was leaving and was so distraught that he wouldn't let go and eventually pulled her out of the window. She survived the fall with just some bruises but then had to endure concentration camps with her parents who eventually died there.

The love of God expressed in the giving of his only Son to bear the judgment for our sin and pay the penalty we deserved as he was lifted up on the cross, defies expression in words. Human illustrations only hint at the depth of God's love...a love which needed a different word in Greek...God's kind of love...agape love...a love that loves even enemies. The Father in expression of his agape love for rebelling, perishing people sent his precious only Son into the world – his sinless, perfect Son – to suffer abuse and injustice and brutal death on a cross all for people who had no love for him, had rejected him as Father and were now loving anything and everything but him. And the Son also willingly offered himself up for this purpose. No one made him do it. He too lived agape love.

Our Three-In-One God loves like no other, and his love is not snuffed out or destroyed by our rebellion and sin. God's love gift to a rebellious, sinful world is his precious, only begotten Son:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).

III. OPENING THE GIFT

Well, gifts need to be opened, don't they? If we don't unwrap them and open them, we don't receive and enjoy what's inside. God's love gift is his Son and his work on the cross, but to open that gift and enjoy its benefits, people must do one thing, and Jesus makes that so clear in John chapter 3. The gift is for all people, but only those who believe in Jesus and are born of the Spirit receive the gift and enjoy the benefits he brings. ***Whoever believes in him***...that phrase is used 3 times, once each in verses 15, 16 and 18... Well, the word, "whoever," means anybody, doesn't it? God's gift is given to all...it's for all people, but only those who will look to Jesus lifted up on the cross and believe in him actually open the gift God has given. To the rest it's like a gift card with an expiration date that gets forgotten or lost until it can no longer be used. Its value to the person is lost forever.

This isn't complicated is it? Jesus told Nicodemus that the gift of God's Son benefits only those who believe in him. But Jesus is talking about more than just knowing that he's God's gift and that belief in him is how we can open his gift. I can know for a fact that the gifts on the table at my birthday party are real gifts for me, but unless I open them and keep them for myself they are of no value to me. In the same way, many people know in their hearts that Jesus is the Savior, but they stop short of actually wanting him for themselves and surrendering to him as the One now in charge of their lives. Scripture says the demons believe in Jesus, but not in a way that saves them, because they don't want him for themselves and aren't ready to surrender to him. To open the gift of Jesus Christ, we need belief in him that says: *Jesus, I believe in you and what you did on the cross and I invite you to come into my life and be my Savior and my Lord.* That's the kind of belief that opens God's love gift to the world.

IV. EXPERIENCING THE GIFT

Well, once we open God's gift of Jesus, what do we experience? What do we get? What are the benefits to us? Well, there a lot more benefits than what Jesus shares with Nicodemus in these few verses, but the two he focuses on are: *eternal life and freedom from condemnation.* At the moment we open God's gift to us through surrendered belief in Jesus, we move from being spiritually dead

and under God's condemnation for our sin, to being spiritually alive forever and freed forever from condemnation.

Let's think about eternal life first. It has at least two aspects. First of all, there's the time factor...eternal life endures forever...it never ends...there will never be a point in time when we're spiritually dead again. No matter when our physical body dies, we will never again be spiritually dead and cut off from relationship with God. Nothing can now separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord! We will never experience the eternal separation from God in hell that comes to those who refuse God's gift and choose to pay the penalty for sin themselves.

But secondly, there's the quality factor...we are now participants in the eternal life...the divine life...a life connected with God in his kingdom that will never end. In this eternal kind of life, even the ordinary and seemingly mundane activities of life on earth take on an eternal significance and are infused with wisdom and power from the eternal, heavenly realm. We walk through life connected with the God of the universe and filled with the power of his Holy Spirit. Eternal life connected with God and under his rule is what we enter into when we believe in Jesus. Death is replaced with life bubbling over.

Now Jesus also focuses on a second benefit in addition to eternal life. It's the amazing benefit of freedom from condemnation. Romans 8:1 describes this reality so beautifully:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Let that sink in for a moment. There's not just slightly less condemnation for those in Christ. Instead there is NO condemnation. Condemnation from God is gone completely for good when we've entered eternal life in Christ. And that's because Christ has absorbed forever on the cross the condemnation and judgment we deserve for the way we've lived our lives apart from him and in rebellion against him.

What is really meant here by condemnation, you might ask? Well, I can guarantee it's something you've experienced in your own life and it's probably something you've done to other people too. Have you ever hurt someone deeply or

offended them and they responded by being done with you? No matter what you do or say, they want nothing to do with you ever again. They've judged you and the sentence they've given is separation from them forever...end of relationship... you no longer exist in their mind...and if you bump into each other they'll either pretend they don't see you or give you an icy glare. That's human condemnation.

But what does God's condemnation look like...the condemnation we're freed from through belief in Christ? Well, condemnation from God is where every single person is apart from relationship with God through Christ. This is a place where our lives and actions and choices, which are all tainted with selfishness and sin, have placed us under God's condemnation and subject to his wrath.

An honest accounting of our lives before the perfect Judge, finds us guilty and condemns us to pay the penalty we deserve, which is death and separation from God forever. Though God loves us so deeply as we've already seen and wants to forgive us and set us free from that penalty, the reality of his character is that he is also perfectly just and must carry out the penalty for the sin that has destroyed so many lives and relationships and caused so much pain and suffering throughout the ages.

So consider yourself in that bleak situation: *tried and found guilty before the Judge and condemned to die*. But wait, there's a way out. There's a way to be freed forever from that condemnation and that death sentence. You just need to believe in and accept the gift of the One who has already paid the penalty for every person who will accept the payment he made. Sure you can go ahead and pay it yourself. You can refuse to accept the gift that's offered. But how foolish would that be, when you could replace that death sentence with eternal life and freedom from condemnation forever?! ***For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***

God forever poured out the condemnation and wrath we deserved for our sin on Jesus Christ, who willingly offered himself up as our substitute. Those who will accept his gift and believe in him are given life by the Spirit and set free from condemnation forever. God will never condemn them again, no matter what failures and mistakes and sin come in the future. Condemnation from God is a thing of the past. He will never be done with or give up on those who are in Christ Jesus.

But in sharp contrast are those who will not accept and open God's love gift of Jesus. They remain under condemnation and subject to his wrath. They have rejected God's one way to life and freedom. Jesus makes this so clear to Nicodemus in verses 18 through 19:

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. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

The world's rejection of God before Christ was already enough to subject them to condemnation. But when God out of deep love for those who had rejected him offered up his only Son to provide life and freedom from condemnation to them, the rejection of that ultimate gift seals the judgment. On the last day when all the dead who've rejected Christ are raised to stand before God's great white throne of judgment, there'll be no deliberation and debate, no hung juries...just a full revealing of all the inner motives, and choices and deeds that led each of them to live as if the One who created them and held them together all their life didn't exist, and then to add to that the rejection of the love gift he gave them on the cross.

V. LIVING THE GIFT

Well this brings us to our final section today, which I've labeled: *Living the Gift*. We've so far talked about God's love gift of Christ, how to open that gift and what we experience when we open it. Now let's look at the beautiful picture in our passage of how life works when we open God's gift and live in its new reality of eternal life and freedom from condemnation. This picture unfolds with a contrast between life in the dark and life in the light. Before we can appreciate life in the light, we need to comprehend life in the dark. Let's read verses 20 and 21 again:

20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

Verse 20 is such a true-to-life principle, isn't it? Just like my cigarette story earlier, when we do things we know are wrong, we do them in secret and then we hide in the dark trying to cover what we've done from fear of being judged, condemned or humiliated...or because we enjoyed the wrong thing we did and want to keep doing it without interference from anyone or without affecting any of our relationships. Dark deeds tend to take place in dark places where they can be hidden from other people and they keep us trapped in the dark.

But notice the stark contrast of verse 21, which represents the drastic change that comes with living in God's eternal life, free from condemnation. We move from life in the dark to life in the light. Suddenly, we no longer have to hide for fear of condemnation because we know we'll never be condemned or written off by God, no matter what we've done. We can now let Christ's light shine into every part of our lives, repenting where needed and letting him forgive us and lead us to freedom from the things that have kept us trapped in the dark. We no longer need to project a false image of who we are, or try to convince others we have it all together, because our worth is no longer found in our performance or accomplishments or possessions, but in knowing Christ and the great value he places on us. Even if other people still condemn us, God never will and in that reality there is great freedom to be real and honest and to live in the light.

And notice that ***whoever does what is true*** [or practices truth] ***comes to the light***. Why? ***So that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God***. This is a picture, my friends, of us giving up our endless efforts to convince other people that we have value and worth through what we do and accomplish. Instead, we rest secure in our identity as a loved child of God who knows that anything good we accomplish for God's glory will only be done by his power within us. We're not coming to the light so that people will see how great we are and how much we've accomplished for God. We're coming to the light so people can see how great God is and how only his powerful within us has changed and transformed us. The goal is not to glorify ourselves and take credit, but to show others evidence that God is real and alive and to invite them to enter eternal life in his kingdom with us.

VI. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

So where are you today in relation to God's love gift of Jesus Christ to you? Have you opened the gift, or is it just sitting on your table looking pretty? Or is it perhaps hidden in a dark closet of your house, out of sight, out of mind? Or maybe you've taken it to church and every once in a while you come to church and admire it and enjoy how beautifully wrapped it is and what a pretty bow it has? I know most of you here have already opened the gift are already enjoying it and discovering every day something else amazing about it. But I'm pretty certain there's probably somebody here who's still keeping it at arm's length. Someone who's either struggling to believe that it's real and that it's really for them, or is worried about what they might have to give up if they open it, or concerned about letting the light of Christ shine into the dark places or their life.

I want to tell you what happened when I finally came into the light about my 6-year old puff on a cigarette. One day when I could finally take it no longer, I awkwardly said to my mom, "Do you think if someone smoked a cigarette one time, they would get cancer?" My mom replied, "Probably not from one time, but why do you ask?" Moms are so perceptive aren't they? Well, that was all it took to unload my burden and come into the light and I finally spilled my story of the neighbor friend who had offered me one his dad's cigarettes.

Do you think my mom condemned me and wrote me off and stopped loving me? Do you think she would have if it was something much more serious? As you know, one thing that almost never dies is a mother's love for her child. And just as she would have done even if it had been the most awful of sins, when I came to my mom in honesty feeling ashamed, she wrapped me up in her arms, told me she loved me and that I wouldn't get lung cancer, and then got me back on my way in life with these words, "But don't ever do that again. It's really bad for you!" Or as Jesus would have said, "Go and son no more!" Had it been a more serious issue, certainly she would have given me consequences to help me learn not to do it again, but there was no condemnation. My mom's love did not fade and I was freed from living in secret with my shame and guilt. And I never smoked another cigarette.

But as great as a mother's love is, it's nothing compared to the intensity and faithfulness of the never-ending, never-changing, steadfast love of God. There is no sin, no failure you could ever bring to him that will stop or change his great love for you...that love that is profoundly expressed in the giving of his only Son to

pay the penalty for those sins. He knows all about them already and has made a way for you to be free. Come into the light and find God's freedom and forgiveness from those things are holding you trapped in the dark.

If you've never opened God's gift to you, I invite you to do it today. Jesus couldn't have made it any more clear than he did in our passage today. Come into the light of Christ, owing up to your sin, believing in what he did for you on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, and inviting him to be your Savior and Lord. It's that simple. Just be honest with him and ask him to save you and bring you into new life in his kingdom. **16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**

And for those of you who have already opened God's gift through belief in Christ, remember that your new life is to be lived in the light. Those days of pretending to be someone we're not or trying to prove our worth by what we do, possess or accomplish, or of trying to hide the dark places in our life from God and others, are meant to be over for good. The eternal value we have in being loved and treasured by God himself and the freedom from condemnation Christ has secured for us, frees us up to finally be real and to bring even the worst of our mistakes and failures into God's light, so that he can lead us out and show us a better way.

And like our God, let's never be people who condemn others. Having been forgiven for so much ourselves, let's never withhold that forgiveness from others. Having been freed from condemnation, let's never condemn or write off or be done with other people. May we reflect the character of God in how we treat those who've hurt us or sinned against us and continue to love them and desire full reconciliation and healing. Let's live in God's agape love by the power of his Holy Spirit within us. And in the body of Christ, as God's children who've been rescued and forgiven, let's be a safe place where people can be real and come into the light without being condemned or written off.

And most of all, let's actively share this amazingly good news, the gospel, about God's love gift of Christ to the world. Let's boldly share it with people everywhere who are trapped in the dark and desperately need to find the way out. You and I have the power of God they need to move from darkness to light, from death to life. **For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...** (Romans 1:16).