

THE CASE FOR JUDGMENT

John 3:19-21

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 9, 2007

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. *John 3:19*

People love courtroom dramas – real and fictional – because of their intellectual intensity and their passionate human dynamics: love, hate, joy, and terror. It is especially dramatic when the attorneys address the jury at the end of a trial. With the accused nervously watching, the victim and his family holding tissues, and the jurors intently following every word, the lawyers try to seal their case. When I was a boy, Perry Mason was the most compelling legal show. Week after week, the episode would climax with Mason unraveling the mystery and exposing the true offender before the court and before the world.

Something like this takes place at the end of the teaching on salvation in John 3. Scholars debate whether Jesus is still speaking or if his words have given way to the apostle John's elaboration. Most commentators see a division between these two at John 3:16, but I am less persuaded of this. There is nothing in the text to separate this later section from Jesus' earlier dialogue with Nicodemus, although John is probably recording an abbreviated version. I bring this up to remind us that Jesus' teaching in John 3:19-21 is connected to what he said earlier. Jesus insisted to the scholarly Pharisee that true spiritual knowledge requires a new spiritual birth. Some people think this removes mankind's responsibility before God. But Jesus concludes his long teaching by pointing out that unbelief is intentional and culpable. Jesus came into the world to save those who believe, but he is nonetheless obliged to state the case for judgment.

“This is the judgment,” he says, with the courtroom of heaven in rapt attention, “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19).

THE TRUEST CONDEMNATION: REJECTING THE LIGHT

There is no limit to the amount of evidence that could convict mankind in God’s court. But there is one offense for which this world receives its truest condemnation. This offense is this world’s response to the coming of God’s Son. At the outset of his Gospel, John described Jesus as a light shining into the world (Jn. 1:4, 9). But, Jesus says, “People loved the darkness rather than the light” (Jn. 3:19). This is our world’s truest condemnation: when God shined his most loving light, the world loved darkness instead, hating the light.

Of all the dreadful things shown about this world in the Bible, there can be nothing worse than its treatment of Jesus. God gave the world every reason to believe in him. The Old Testament contained prophecies that clearly pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. Take just the prophecies of his birth. When King Herod was told that these prophecies were being fulfilled in the town of Bethlehem what did he do? Did Herod come to pledge his loyalty? Did he pay homage to the coming Messiah? Far from it! Instead, he sent soldiers to slaughter all the baby boys of Bethlehem, in the vain hope that he might put out the light that God had sent shining into the world.

Furthermore, Jesus performed spectacular miracles that proved his teaching and marked him as the Savior. But even these did not produce real devotion. In John 6, the five thousand rejoiced when Jesus filled their bellies with just a few loaves and fish. But when he then preached the gospel, they all left (Jn. 6:60-66). An even greater crime occurred after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This widely publicized miracle proved that Jesus had power to bring the dead to life! But upon learning about it, the Sanhedrin decided finally to have him put to death (Jn. 11:45-53). Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

If you want to know what this world is like, look what it did to him. He was the Son of God. He had left the throne of heaven, he had come and humbled himself, and he gave himself to healing people, and to

instructing them. He never did anyone any harm. He went about doing good. What was the response of the world? It hated him, it persecuted him, it rejected him. It chose a murderer before him. It crucified him, it killed him. And there on the cross he exposed the world for what it is.¹

It would be a great mistake to think the world has changed since then. If Jesus came today his treatment would be the same. We know this by how the majority of people respond to the gospel. Lloyd-Jones notes: “The clever men of the world today are laughing at the cross, they are mocking it, they are jeering at it, they are making fun of the blood of Christ, and they are trying to ridicule it. They are only doing what their prototypes did in the first century. That is what the world has always done to him.”² Moreover, we would be just as mistaken to think that we are any different. Until we are born again, none of us receive Jesus Christ, the light God has sent. People may have kind, polite things to say about Jesus, but when he presses his claims as Lord and Savior, John 3:20 rightly says the world “hates the light.”

The world is condemned before God on many charges. We are condemned for our wars and our cruelty, and for countless and daily transgressions on the national and individual level. But all else pales before our true condemnation: “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light” (Jn. 3:19).

THE TRUE CAUSE OF UNBELIEF: “THEIR DEEDS WERE EVIL”

It is the habit of most people, when they are accused of a sin or crime, to look for an excuse. This happens in our courtrooms.

Guilty people try to avoid punishment – sometimes successfully – by saying it was not their fault or that circumstances gave them no other option. But when it comes to the world’s judgment for rejecting God’s Son, Jesus rules out any excuse. He says that people rejected the light for the darkness “because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19).

Christians are sometimes frustrated by the gospel’s apparent lack of success, and are tempted to use more worldly methods that will win the world’s approval. But they fail to realize that the true problem is a moral one: people love darkness and hate the light. Therefore, one

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The Cross*, 99.

² *Ibid.*, 100.

of the worst things we can do is encourage people to enjoy the church without challenging their love for sin. Worldly entertainment in the church does not promote true and saving faith but false and empty religion. Salvation requires God's supernatural work to change hearts – “You must be born again,” Jesus says (Jn. 3:7) – which the Bible says occurs through the preaching of God's Word (see 1 Pet. 1:23).

In general, the cause for unbelief is not intellectual or cultural, but *moral*. People do not want to submit to God because they love their sins and are not willing to give them up. This was admitted in the memoirs of Aldous Huxley, one of the 20th century's leading atheists. He spent his whole life opposing the Bible and teaching that life is without meaning. At the end, he wrote:

For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom... I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.³

That fits perfectly with John 3:19, “People loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” Sin keeps us from faith, since devotion to Christ threatens our devotion to cherished sin.

But there is a second way sin keeps us from believing. Jesus adds, “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:20).

Because sinners desperately fear that their sins will be brought to light, they hate Jesus all the more. William Hendriksen explains:

“Such a person is always avoiding the light; i.e., he will have nothing to do with the Christ... Hence, he never reads the Bible; refuses to attend church, etc. In his heart he really *hates* the light. The reason for this is that he fears lest (by this light) his (evil) deeds might be exposed. People of this type resemble loathsome insects that hide themselves beneath logs and stones, always preferring the darkness, and terribly frightened whenever they are exposed to the light.”⁴

³ Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), 273.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 143-144.

This is a motive for unbelief especially among those who are respectable in the eyes of others. They are not willing to give up sin, but they want people to think they are righteous. This especially describes the opposition of the religious authorities to Jesus. The Pharisees were considered the most righteous of all people, and they took great pride in this. But Jesus was obviously so much better than they were – his obedience to the law was spiritual and true while theirs was cold and formal – so their righteousness was tarnished in his light. They were like candles in a dark night, and Jesus was the rising of the blazing dawn, so that no one praised their light anymore. Therefore, as Jesus says, they hated the light. Rather than admit the corruption in their hearts and be healed by Jesus, they plotted to remove him so that their deeds would not be seen for what they were.

From this teaching, we can draw some important applications. The first is that we must not cherish sin. Sin is not merely one more blot in our ledger, but it is a terrible threat to our faith and thus to our salvation. Donald Grey Barnhouse told of once speaking to a group of young women on a college campus, after which a freshman came up to see him. Her face was contorted with anger and she denounced his gospel message, having escaped all that nonsense since she came to college. Barnhouse asked her if she was raised in a Christian home. When she admitted she was, he wisely asked, “When did you reject Christianity?” She answered, “In November.” Barnhouse followed up, “Tell me, what happened in October?” At this, she broke down in tears, for she had gotten into sexual sin, and the combination of sinful desire and shame is what caused her to turn away from Christ. Barnhouse prayed with her, helped her to repent, and restored her to her Savior.

Do you have a sin that keeps from you from Christ? If so, recognize your peril. Sin promises pleasure, but especially when it keeps us from following Jesus it is mortally destructive to our souls. I have learned in my years of ministry that when a Christian has backslidden deeply into sin – when a church member has embroiled himself in a sinful sexual relationship, or has given himself over to greed and a lust for worldly success, or has sought to gain the favor of impressive, worldly people – I always find that the person has also stopped reading his or her Bible, has stopped meeting with God in prayer, and

rarely, if ever, worships God in the company of the church. The reason is that either God keeps us from sin or sin keeps us from God. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Mt. 6:24). So it is with every kind of sin. We must war against sin and never allow love for sin to keep us from Christ.

John 3:20 shows that this is especially true when it comes to the sin of pride. We are seldom in greater peril than when we love to receive praise for our godliness. Charles Spurgeon was once greeting people after preaching. A woman gushed about the glory of his sermon and praised him for his great godliness. Spurgeon replied, “Yes, I know. The devil told me all that as soon as I stepped out of the pulpit.” C. S. Lewis wisely counsels us: “Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good - above all, that we are better than someone else - I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil.”⁵ We must not, therefore, seek our own glory as Christians. If we are caught in a sin, we must confess it without hesitation or resentment. The best of men are men at best; we are every one of us sinners in need of forgiveness and grace.

Consider that Jesus was the one truly sinless man, yet he was the most humble. But Satan, that most wicked of creatures, stands out for his pride. This alone should put us on alert against pride. Lewis states, “Pride... is the complete anti-God state of mind.”⁶ The worst thing about pride, and our greatest motive for opposing it in our hearts, is the one given by Jesus – it makes us love the darkness and hate the light of Christ, lest we should be humbled as the sinners that we are.

THOSE WHO ARE TRUE: COMING INTO THE LIGHT

The glory of the gospel is that despite such whole-hearted opposition, people do come to Christ so as to believe in him and be saved. Instead of living a lie, they become people who are true, and show their love for truth by walking in the light. Jesus said, “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” (Jn. 3:21).

⁵ C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, 111

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

This teaches us that ours must be a living faith. In the previous chapter, we considered the definition of saving faith. Faith consists in knowledge, assent, and commitment. But John 3:21 tells us two important characteristics of true faith. First, saving faith results in a changed life: “Whoever does what is true comes to the light.”

These few words describe the whole of the Christian life. What do we do when we have believed in Jesus? The answer is that we come into the light. Psalm 119:105 speaks of God’s Word as the light by which believers walk: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” We begin not merely studying God’s Word but also living God’s Word. The Bible changes us by reshaping our attitudes and our behaviors about everything in life: about work and play, about time and money, about ourselves and others, and especially about the surpassing value and glory of knowing and serving Jesus Christ. Martin Luther wrote: “Faith must be sincere and genuine... unfeigned and active, manifesting itself through good works... Good works must issue from this faith; otherwise, faith is not genuine.”⁷

True believers “come to the light” and live by the light of God’s Word. The result is blessing for ourselves and others. In his first epistle, John says, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). Does that characterize your life? Do you live in accordance with God’s Word, rejecting self-righteous pride and humbly seeking to obey God? If you do, you will enjoy harmonious relationships and a clear conscience. Paul said, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). If we are not enjoying such a life, then we must exercise our faith in Christ by coming to live and walk in the light of his Word.

I mentioned earlier that William Hendriksen compares those who hate the light to insects hiding under rocks. But believers, he says, “resemble beautiful houseplants which turn their green parts toward the window and the light of the sun.”⁸ Those in the light abound in blessing and also grow in grace and in their relationship with God.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*, Luther’s Works, (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 22:393.

⁸ Hendriksen, 144.

John 3:21 tells us two important things about true faith, the first of which is that it produces this changed life. But, secondly, a true faith is motivated to exalt the glory of God. Jesus says, “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.”

This is the difference between the false spirituality of the self-righteous and the true spirituality of genuine faith. It is not that one does good works and the other does not. The Pharisees were known for good works. But their works were done to exalt themselves and provide a cover for their sins. But those who are true do good works so that God will be praised and his kingdom advanced. This is the difference: those who live for self through sin and hate the light of Christ for exposing their hypocrisy versus those who live for Christ, who humbly walk in the light for the glory of God.

This is the way to live. I mentioned that sin keeps us from God. But, conversely, a love for God and a zeal for his kingdom will keep us from sin. One of the best ways to make headway in your sanctification is to start witnessing the gospel. You will become zealous for the glory of God’s name and will not want the gospel to be disgraced by your life. You will want people to see the light reflected in you, so you will walk in the light to the glory of God. This is what Jesus commanded us, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

CONVICTED!

When I was in high school, I attended a Christian camp the summer before my senior year. It was a time of intense fellow-ship in the Lord, and we all received Bibles when we left. Years later, after I had backslidden into hardened unbelief during college, I sometimes would take that Bible off the shelf. My heart would be pierced by the godly encouragements written on the inside cover by my former friends. But I was especially burdened by a card placed inside that Bible. It asked, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence for you to be convicted?”

We began by picturing Jesus in God's court stating the case for judgment against the world: "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (Jn. 3:19). But what about the world's judgment of you? The world condemned Jesus and put him to death on the cross. Would the world have enough evidence to convict you as a believer in his name? Or would there be so much conflicting testimony that you could pass for an unbeliever? How vital it is for you that the evidence for your faith in Christ is clear and convicting, so that though despised by the world you might escape the world's judgment before God.

Of one thing you can be absolutely sure: in the end it will be Christ who judges the world and not the world that judges Christ. The world hated Jesus and put him to death. But God raised him from the dead and seated him on the throne of heaven, from which he will return to judge the living and the dead. Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Mt. 25:31). On that day, you will want it clearly established that you belong to Jesus because you came to him and walked in the light. But that future judgment and your eternal destiny are decided now, by how you respond to Jesus: either hating the light and loving darkness, or hating darkness and loving the light.

Come to the light of Christ and be saved. Do not cherish a love of sin that will lead you into destruction. Do not permit the pride that will harden you against the Lord. But walk in the light to the glory of God, and in due time that light will lead you to live with Christ in glory forever.