

Bible Fellowship Teaching Plan for John 3:16-21 (May 10, 2026)  
“To Believe or Not to Believe”

Opening Question: If someone asked you how you know God loves you, what would you say?

John’s purpose (20:31): “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

## I. Introduction

- A. Continuation of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus.
- B. Connection to Numbers, chapter 21 (bronze serpent lifted up)

## II. God’s Great Love Revealed (verse 16)

### A. The Source of Love: God

- Love originates with God (1 John 4:19)
- God loves because it is His nature (1 John 4:8)

### B. The Magnitude of God’s Love: “So loved”--“so much” or “in such a magnificent way”

### C. Love defined: “God loved”

- Five Greek words for love: brotherly love, familial love, strong desire, romantic love, and agape love
- Agape love is the strongest word in the Greek vocabulary to represent not an attraction based on emotions, but a willful commitment and persistent dedication to nurture and enhance the well-being of someone else.
- Agape love is seen in what it does (1 John 4:10, Romans 5:6-8, Ephesians 2:4)

C. The object of God's love: "the world"

- Not just the Jews
- You!!

D. The Demonstration of God's Love: "He gave"

- God gave His only Son
- God gave Himself (1 John 1:18)

E. The Purpose of the Gift: "so that whoever believes in Him"

- Believes: an activity that takes people from where they are and unites them with Christ; a complete commitment of trustful reliance on God, a fundamental transformation whereby we stop relying on our own merit and achievements and place, deposit, rest, anchor our trust and eternal hope in Christ alone.

Discussion Question: How is saving faith different from simply believing facts about Jesus?

F. The Benefits of the Gift: "not perish but have eternal life"

- Perish: the waste, ruin, destruction, or tragic loss, for example, of what your life could have been
- Eternal Life:
  - Refers more to the quality of life than the quantity of life
  - Life characterized by a deep, personal relationship with God, marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of the believer's character to reflect the nature of Christ
  - The perfection of what life was intended to be
  - Begins the moment a person believes Christ

III. Christ Came to Save, Not Condemn (verse 17)

A. Jesus' Mission: not to condemn the world but to save the world

B. The Law condemns by exposing guilt--it cannot save

Discussion Question: Why do some people see only condemnation in Christianity?

C. What Salvation Means

- Deliverance from sin, condemnation, meaninglessness, spiritual death
- Freedom to live with a new sense of purpose in communion with God

IV. The Two Responses to Christ (verse 18): there is no middle ground

A. The Believer: not condemned (Romans 8:1)

B. The Unbeliever: condemned already for having rejected God's gift

Discussion Question: Why is unbelief ultimately a choice?

V. Light vs. Darkness (verses 19-21)

- Human sin is not the result of ignorance; it's a deliberate choice
- Light is "the primary, biblical image for God's self-disclosure, moral purity, saving truth, and transforming power"
- Darkness refers to the absence of or opposition to moral, intellectual, and spiritual truth and God's self-revelation

A. Why People Reject the Light

- Hate the light, love the darkness
- Desire to hide sinful deeds
- Rejection of God's authority
- The issue is not lack of evidence for the truth of Christ but resistance to the truth

B. The Response of the True Believer

- Comes to the light willingly
- Longs for truth and holiness
- Displays transformed living (1 John 1:5-9)

## VI. Application for Today

A. God's love is available to all; no one is beyond God's reach.

B. Belief requires personal commitment; faith is not merely knowledge--it involves complete surrender and trust

## VII. Conclusion/Questions for Personal Reflection

- Have I truly entrusted my life to Christ?
- What am I trying to hide in the darkness that Christ wants to expose?
- What evidence of eternal life is visible in my daily life?
- Is my life marked by trust, obedience, and transformation?

Final thought: The real question is not: "To be or not to be." "To believe or not to believe"--that's the question!

Next week: John 4:27-45: the response of the disciples and the Samaritans following Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well.

Sunday School Lesson for May 10, 2026  
John 3:16-21

Happy Mothers' Day and welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this second Sunday in May, we're well into our study of the deep and wondrously profound gospel according to John, whose purpose in writing this book, as he tells us in chapter twenty, verse 31, is "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Following Pastor Trey's sermon on the first fifteen verses of John chapter three, we continue today with the rest of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in verses sixteen through 21. If you've not yet heard his message, let me tell you what's been happening.

As chapter three opens, we're introduced to a man named Nicodemus whom John identifies as "a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews." Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night--apparently not wanting to be seen with the Lord--to try to understand Who He is. In the conversation that followed, Nicodemus is presented with truths from the Old Testament that he should have understood. Jesus summarizes the conversation by showing Nicodemus how God planned to make a way for sin to be forgiven and for us to be delivered from eternal death illustrated by a particular event the children of Israel experienced that's recorded for us in the Book of Numbers, chapter 21. Jesus told him, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Just like that serpent that Moses put on a pole so that those who looked to it--in faith--would be spared from temporal, physical death, Jesus would be nailed to a cross, and everyone who looked to Him--in faith--would be spared from eternal, spiritual death.

With this very clear picture solidly planted in Nicodemus' mind of the snakes sweeping through the Israelite encampment, biting everyone in their path, and bringing death because they had grumbled against God's plan for them, / then Moses casting a serpent out of bronze and lifting it up on a pole so that everyone who had been bitten by one of the snakes and looked at it, would live, Jesus follows that with what is certainly the best known verse in all of the Word of God: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The verse actually begins with the word "for" because what follows Jesus' illustration of the serpent being lifted up is intricately connected with this broader statement of God's love.

I'm sure you noticed that the very first noun in this passage is "God." My name's not there and you're name's not there because love originated with God and not with us. In fact, God's love for us springs from within Himself. It's not a response to anything that we had done or ever could do. In First John, chapter four, verse nineteen, John simply says, "We love because he first loved us." God loves because it's His nature to love; in fact, in chapter four, verse eight of John's first letter, he tells us that God is love.

But how could we ever know the love of God? Alexander Maclaren begins his thoughts on this verse by reminding us that "Before Jesus Christ came into this world no one ever dreamt of saying 'God loves.' Some of the Old Testament psalmists had glimpses of that truth and came pretty near expressing it. But among all the 'gods ...,' there were lustful gods and beautiful gods, and idle gods, and fighting gods and peaceful gods: but not one of whom worshippers said, 'He loves.' Once it was a new and almost incredible message, but we have grown accustomed to it, and it is not strange any more to us. But if we would try to think of what it means, the whole truth would flash up into fresh newness, and all the miseries and sorrows and perplexities of our lives would drift away down the wind, and we should be no

more troubled with them. ‘God loves’ is the greatest thing that can be said by [human] lips.”

“God so loved the world”--“so much” or “in such a “magnificent way.” Since love is an essential part of the nature of God, how could we know this aspect of God’s nature? How could we know God’s love apart from a personal experience of His love?

There just happened to be an occasion by which God showed the intensity and the grandeur of His love. You see, the very first couple whom God had created and blessed had tragically departed from the way of life He had designed for them, and the curse of their sinful choice fell upon you and me. There, in the ruins of humanity, at the right time and the right place, God revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. The object of God’s love was nothing less than the entire world--you and me and everyone who has lived or ever will live. The far-reaching purpose of that love was negative and positive--negatively in that by believing in Him, we would not perish; positively in that by believing in Him we would have eternal life.

Had there been no fall of man, were there no need for God to demonstrate His love to those who had strayed from His perfect plan for life, were mankind not destined to eternal separation from God because we had strayed from God, / there would never have been a need for God to reveal His love. But now, in spite of our sin, in spite of our waywardness, in spite of our rejection of His plan for our lives, God still loves us.

The word we have translated here as “love” is one of five, different words in the Greek vocabulary of the day that are translated love--a word that refers to “the love of friendship” or “brotherly love,” a word that means “familial love” or “love among members of a family,” a word that refers to a strong desire, a word that is used to speak of romantic love, and the word for love we find here in verse sixteen. This agape love is the strongest word in the Greek vocabulary to represent not an attraction based on emotions, but a willful

commitment and persistent dedication to nurture and enhance the well-being of someone else. That's a brief definition of the love that Jesus speaks about here, but it barely touches the surface of what this love really is.

This love isn't found so much in what it says as in what it does. Jesus shows us what love is by what love does. We could begin with First John, chapter four, verse ten: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

All of scripture bears witness to God's abhorrence of evil--all those attitudes, words, thoughts, and actions that are contrary to His good and perfect plan for His creation. Because of our sin, we needed a means to be forgiven--the propitiation that John speaks of in this verse. This means of forgiveness is found only in the spotless Son of God crucified. It's not a love given to those who are deemed worthy of that love; instead, it's lavished upon sinners--the very ones who have rejected His good and perfect plan for His creation. Until we see ourselves for what we truly are--the objects of God's wrath--and the cross for what it is, we can't begin to see His love for what it is.

Paul develops this idea in his letter to the Romans in chapter five, beginning in verse six: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die--but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul is telling us that it's the cross that shows us what God's love is.

And he explains this to the followers of Christ in Ephesus as well in chapter two, verse four: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." This declaration follows what he said in the first verse of that chapter about our being dead in trespasses and sin and, as a result, we were, by nature, children of wrath. We didn't deserve God's love; in

fact, we deserved God's retribution. So we see what God's love is by what it does, and there's so much more we could add to these few comments.

To whom, then, is God's love directed? God so loved the world. This would have been a startling revelation to Nicodemus who had been brought up to believe that God cared only for His chosen people. One commentator mentions several Jewish documents to confirm this, including one that reads, "In the time to come, the holy, blessed God will bring the nations of the world and will cast them into the midst of hell under the Israelites." But God's love is not limited to one, privileged group. "God loved the world."

MacLaren calls us to understand what that means to you and me: "Have you ever realised that when we say, 'He loved the world,' that really means, as far as each of us is concerned, He loves me [--He loves you]? And just as the whole beams of the sun come pouring down into every eye of the crowd that is looking up to it, so the whole love of God pours down, not upon a multitude, an abstraction, a community, but upon every single soul that makes up that community. He loves us all because He loves us each. We shall never get all the good of that thought until we translate it, and lay it upon our hearts. It is all very well to say, 'Ah yes! God is love,' and it is all very well to say He loves 'the world.' But I will tell you what is a great deal better: to say what Paul said: '[He] loved me and gave Himself for me.'"

How did God demonstrate His love to us? How do we know God "so" loved us? He sent us a gift to reveal and authenticate His love--a free, undeserved, and unearned gift. We had no claim on God. We could never put God in our debt to the point that we deserved a gift. His act of giving was a sovereign act of grace--"While we were still sinners"--Paul tells the followers of Christ in Rome in chapter five, verse eight, of his letter to them, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

What was that gift? His only-begotten Son. Those who love much, give much, and the richest gifts come from those who love the most, and so it is

with God. The love that spares nothing but spends itself to help and bless those who are the object of that love is love indeed, love that is seen and experienced in something far, far more than words alone.

God gave His only Son--his beloved Son, the One in Whom He was well-pleased. This is the highest expression of love we could ever imagine. None of us ever had a son like that to give. Our sons are the sons of a man and a woman. His was the Son of God. In a very real way, the Father gave Himself, for Jesus is, in His eternal nature, nothing less than God, as Paul told the believers in Colossae in his letter to them, chapter two, verse nine: "For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," and, in verse eighteen of the opening chapter of this gospel of John, he wrote, "The only God,"--speaking of Jesus--"who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." So when God gave His Son for us, He gave Himself. It's no wonder we sing, "amazing love--how can it be?!"

Not only did God give His Son because of His great love for you and me, God gave His Son to deliver you and me from eternal punishment--"so that whoever believes in Him might not perish." Here's the second of John's words in this verse that are filled with deep meaning and significance: believe. It's belief that's at the heart of John's message, for he tells us in chapter twenty, verse 31, that he's written his record of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Some form of the word, "to believe" appears 98 times in John's gospel and always as a verb but never as a noun, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke only use it thirty times altogether. Twelve times he uses it to speak of believing in things like facts, nineteen times he uses it in reference to believing things like people or scripture, 36 times he uses it to speak of believing in Christ, and thirty times he uses it absolutely--without a defined object of that belief.

Belief in Christ is, for John, an activity that takes people from where they are and unites them with Christ. John also speaks of “abiding” in Christ as we’ll see later. Although “believing” and “abiding” aren’t connected in John, they clearly mean much the same thing. In fact, the abiding that Jesus talks about in chapter fifteen is practically the equivalent of believing.

One commentator writes, “So important is this conception of believing ‘in’ Christ that the verb can be used ... with no object expressed. There is no need in this Gospel to say who is in mind when ‘believing’ is spoken of. Believing and Christ are so much part of one another that the former inevitably implies the latter.”

So, believing, as John uses the word, involves far more than simply agreeing to a set of facts, or agreeing that the reality of those facts could be important to my life or yours. Believing necessarily involves a complete commitment of trustful reliance on God, a fundamental transformation whereby we stop relying on our own merit and achievements and place, deposit, rest, anchor our trust and eternal hope in Christ alone.

The point here is reliance on the truth--not just recognizing truth, not just seeing its relevance to my life, but actually investing my life in and entrusting my life to the One Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It requires that we engage our minds to focus our attention on God, that we employ our emotions as His intervention meets our desperation, and that we act on that knowledge and that relevance as we earnestly seek Him and entrust all that we are, all that we have, all that we could be to Him. When you say, “I believe” in the way John speaks of here in his gospel, your entire existence hinges on that phrase, and the flight path of your eternity is set in motion.

Why is this belief so critical, so absolutely essential if we want to truly live? We believe so that we would not perish, but have eternal life. Two more big words in John’s gospel: “perish” and “life.” The Bible makes the facts of the matter quite clear: apart from Christ, there is no eternal hope, no chance of

escaping the just punishment for your rejection of God's loving plan for your life.

What does it mean to perish? The word is used here and most other places to describe the waste, ruin, destruction, or tragic loss, for example, of what your life could have been. Only metaphorically does it include the idea of eternal judgment as we find in Matthew, chapter ten, verse 28, where Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." We all know of those who once had great potential but who wasted their lives after being caught up in some addiction, for example. As used here, "to perish" is the opposite of having the eternal life that He speaks of in the next part of this verse.

It's like this: God has a wonderful plan for you and for me and for everyone. There's a clear and sure goal towards which God is working all things, and He invites you and me to join with Him in reaching the goal He has for us. If we choose a different path--if we refuse to follow God's path--if we set out on our own to do what we think is best for ourselves apart from God, we'll never experience the life that He has intended for us. And, in missing the mark, in failing to reach God's objective, our lives come to nothing, and all that could have been perishes.

Apart from Christ, there is no meaning, peace, or sense of fulfillment in this life. The seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, wrote about this, asking, "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself." You can try to fill your life with things, with physical relationships, with sports, with pleasure, with professional or career success,

and still be as empty as can be; and then, when it's all over all that could have been in your life is gone--it's perished.

It's only in Christ that you find what your soul longs for. God knew that, so He gave His Son to deliver you and me from eternal nothingness, everlasting irrelevance, and unending emptiness. He did that by giving His Son to grant you eternal life. Notice what John doesn't say--he doesn't say that God gave His Son to all those who will keep His Law, because none of us could ever do that. It's not within human power alone to keep even the first of the ten commandments, let alone all the rest. If God had given His Son to all those who would keep His law, then none of us would have access to the gift of His Son.

Neither does He say that God gave His Son to all those who could do enough good things in life to earn their salvation. Once again, that's just not possible, because our sin against God is too great--the penalty for an infinite sin against an infinite God can never be paid by finite people. All of us together could never do enough good things to free even the best of us from God's righteous judgment.

How is it, then, that we avoid the eternal punishment of perishing? We accept God's offer of eternal life when we entrust ourselves to Christ: "Whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The experience and enjoyment of this eternal life is not something that waits for us down the road somewhere after we die. If it's eternal, it must already be. In other words, if you've entrusted your life, you are now living that eternal life. There is a far better experience that awaits you after death when you'll be free from the penalty, the power, and, praise God, the presence of sin, but God's abundant life is available to you today. God's love for us demonstrated so clearly on Calvary's cross has everything to do with how we live today--right now--, not just how we'll live in the sweet by-and-by. John writes in chapter three, verse two of his first letter: "Beloved, we are God's

children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

Like the word “perish,” the term “eternal life” refers more to the quality of life than the quantity of life. John uses the phrase seventeen times in his gospel and six times in his first letter, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke use it only eight times altogether. “This life is characterized by a deep, personal relationship with God, marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of the believer's character to reflect the nature of Christ.” Jesus will define eternal life for us in chapter seventeen, verse three: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This knowledge is not simply intellectual--it’s essentially relational, involving a deep, personal communion with God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Again--this life isn’t so much about the length of life in the here and hereafter--although that is certainly a key component of this life--it’s more about the excellence of that life: it’s a new condition--a spiritual order of existence and fellowship with God, the truly “good” life, the perfection of what life was intended to be, the satisfaction of life in God, unaffected by change, untouched by decay, and impervious to perishing.

God’s gift of eternal life is available to all who will believe: “Whoever believes in Him will not perish but **will have** everlasting life,” and that security in Christ lasts forever. When we entrust our lives to Christ, we discover meaning and purpose because God fills that void in our hearts, and our experience of eternal life begins, and it will never end. This amazing love is available to us because, at the unlikeliest time--when we deserved the very opposite of God’s love--He loved each and every person who has or ever will live so much, that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. And we’ve just barely scratched the surface of this single verse that so magnificently and thoroughly proclaims the gospel--the good news of Jesus Christ--, but we must press on.

In verse seventeen, Jesus begins to elaborate on what we've just heard. Having declared the love of God for mankind in verse sixteen, our Lord explains why it was necessary for that love to exist--why it is that God loved the world so much that He sent His only-begotten Son, and why it is that we must devote our lives to Him in a total commitment of trust and loving obedience. As is so characteristic in John's writings, he tells us first negatively and then positively: "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."

Negatively, our Lord tells us that the Father did not send His Son into the world to judge people or condemn them. After all, Jesus said in verse sixteen that whoever believes in God's Son would not perish, but would have everlasting life"--"Whoever believes" is the key idea here. The purpose of the mission of our Lord Jesus was that every one who believed in Christ should have eternal life with God. Our Lord's purpose in coming was to be the Savior of the world, not our judge, but our Deliverer, our Savior, our Lord.

This, by the way, was in direct opposition to the Jewish understanding of the Messiah's mission. According to the Jews, the Messiah was to come for judgment against the Gentiles. Nicodemus must have found this--among other things in this conversation--extremely unsettling.

Why do we all need a Deliverer, a Savior, a Lord? Because you and I have not believed that God really is Who He says He is. God is the Creator, it is He Who gave us life, therefore we owe our very existence to Him. God has a perfect plan for our lives, but sooner or later each and every one of us here told God, "No." Even though our lives belong to Him, we cast off His rightful rule in our lives, and we died to God. No longer could we enjoy the blessings of life as it was meant to be, because we had rejected the very source of life, and so the Bible tells us what we already knew: "All have sinned;" all of us fall short of God's ideal for our lives because of our self-sufficiency and self-righteousness, and all of us stand guilty and condemned before the holy and righteous God.

But Jesus didn't come to condemn the world--that's not why the Father sent His Son. The Law has done a very good job of condemning people. In Romans, chapter three, verse nineteen, Paul writes, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." And he soon after adds in chapter seven, verse seven, "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." It's the Law that condemns us; it's Jesus who fulfilled the Law and now saves us.

What does it mean to be saved? It means that you have come to a personal encounter with God as a result of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit Who came to convict the world of personal, individual sin; of the righteousness of Christ as the standard by which our lives are measured; and of judgment, because all the world stands judged before a holy and righteous God. And in that personal encounter with God, you saw yourself as God sees you, and it broke your heart because you knew it broke God's heart because He loves you so. And as you met God in the center of your being, in your very heart of hearts, you agreed with God that His judgment was just and true--you had sinned and you could do nothing on your own to make things right between you and God. So, you asked God to save you, to deliver you, to free you from your sin / which you now freely admitted. You turned your back on your life of self-dependence, self-righteousness, and pride, and placed your life in God's hands. And God took you and forgave you for Jesus' sake, removed your sin from you as far as the east is from the west; He gave you a new life, placed His Spirit within you, and wrote your name in His special book, the Book of Life. It's like you were born all over again as God adopted you as one of His children.

The word “saved” simply means “to be delivered.” What is it that we need deliverance from? We need deliverance from the condemnation that we already stand in, and, once we’re delivered from the condemnation we deserve, we stop living a life that’s perishing due to our bondage to sin and start living in the freedom Christ gives. Salvation brings freedom--freedom **from** God’s just and righteous judgment for our sins, freedom **from** our guilty conscience, and freedom **to live** and walk and grow in a personal relationship with Him as His children as we then have the privilege to truly call God, the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, Our Father. Freedom from the bitter sense of meaninglessness and insignificance into a new sense of purpose in God’s new society of love in which the first are last and the last are first, the poor / rich and the meek / heirs of the kingdom of God. Salvation is freedom from the dark and doomed prison of self-centeredness into a new life of fulfillment through self-denying service. And one day, God’s salvation will mean the freedom from the futility of pain, decay, death, and dissolution into a new world of immortality, beauty, and unimaginable joy. All this and so much more in this salvation that comes to all those who are saved through Christ.

In verse eighteen, the Lord Jesus makes it clear that there are only two possibilities: “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.” When it comes to believing, there are only two choices--you’re either believing in Him or you’re not believing in Him. There’s no middle ground--no neutral position.

For those who believe, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”--Romans, chapter eight, verse one. On the other hand, unbelievers don’t need to be sentenced by the Messiah; their unbelief is, of itself, their sentence: “Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” The

measure by which each and every person is judged is his or her choice of belief or unbelief in the only Son of God.

So, the final judgment is anticipated, but it's not irreversible. If that person agrees with God's judgment and turns to Him in repentance and faith and believes, that unbeliever will become a believer, and the judgment upon him or her is no longer a judgment of condemnation, but one of life and peace. On the other hand, nothing can reveal a more ungodly, obstinate, and worldly state than a refusal to receive so gracious and magnificent a gift as the Name of the only Son of God.

Do you know what it is that makes Christianity unique from other religions? Buddhism sees the human predicament in suffering rather than as a consequence of personal sin. For Buddhists, unregulated desire is the cause of suffering, and deliverance only comes through the elimination of desire through self-effort. There is no God, and there is no Savior. "Strive without ceasing" were the Buddha's last words to his disciples before his death. But there's no answer to the problem of humanity's separation from God in Buddhism.

Hinduism says that our problems come from what we did in our previous lives. We are stuck in an endless cycle of rebirths until we can, through our own efforts, reach Nirvana when our personality is extinguished, and we are absorbed into an impersonal, divine reality. But there's no answer to the problem of evil and humanity's separation from God in Hinduism.

Although Islam speaks of the mercy of God, they know of no instance in history where God has demonstrated His mercy. There is no message for sinners who deserve God's judgment other than that they will receive the judgment they deserve. All a Moslem can do is submit himself to God and hope that all his good deeds somehow outweigh his bad deeds, but there's no Savior.

The basis of the judgment the Lord speaks of here in these verses is plain, but the Lord makes it crystal clear in verse nineteen that human sin is not the result of ignorance; it's a deliberate choice: "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. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

Given the choice between good and evil--trusting God in obedience and refusing to trust Him to pursue disobedience--people will choose evil. At the root of every refusal to trust Christ is a craving to be free of God's righteous standard. And here we have yet another important set of terms in John's gospel: light and darkness. Light refers to spiritual realities revealed in the Word of God by the Spirit of God. One word study defines it as "the primary, biblical image for God's self-disclosure, moral purity, saving truth, and transforming power. Wherever [light] appears, darkness is either dispelled or exposed, and a decisive movement toward life and righteousness is implied."

In this contrast, darkness, on the other hand, refers to the absence of or opposition to moral, intellectual, spiritual truth and God's self-revelation. The root cause of unbelief is the refusal to turn to Him as the Light lest the true nature of their evil be revealed. Those who prefer this darkness naturally "hate the light," because it exposes and condemns their sin and depravity, so they avoid any kind of light that would reveal their rejection of God righteousness.

In contrast to those who hate the light and choose to hide in darkness so that their evil deeds are not revealed for what they truly are--verse 21: "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." With these words, we could imagine that the Lord Jesus is offering Nicodemus the invitation to become one of those who comes to the light to know and live by truth.

"Whoever does what is true comes to the light," because it's the light that exposes our darkness. Such a person loves the light and is able to do what is

true because he or she invites and welcomes the light to rip the covers and camouflage from his or her life and bring conviction because God has placed within that person the longing for holiness and a relationship with God unstained by sin, untarnished by evil, and unblemished by iniquity.

This is how John puts it beginning in verse five of the first chapter of his first letter: “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But 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. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

As you walk in the light--as you embrace the truth of God that reveals your attempts to shut out the light and you agree with God that those attempts to shut out the light are sin, “he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Your sin problem--my sin problem--is resolved as we come to the light, longing for the Lord to make us holy, even as He is holy. Then the world will clearly see a life transformed and made new by the love of God received and believed.

I’m sure that, when Nicodemus met secretly with the Lord that night so no one would see him, he had no idea what he would learn about God, God’s love, God’s love for the world, and how God’s very own Son was the Light, and that, by anchoring his eternal hope and security in the very Man Who sat before him, he could be saved and begin to enjoy life in all its fullness--more than he could ever ask or imagine, if he would but choose to open his life to the Light and believe. Taking a line from Hamlet, the question’s not, “To be or not to be;” the real question is “To believe or not to believe? That’s the question.”

Thank you for being a part of our study of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus seen through John's eyes that's meant to lead you to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, by believing in Him, you might experience the fullness of life that can only come in Him. Next week, following Trey's message from Jesus' magnificent conversation with the Samaritan woman He met at a well in the first 26 verses of chapter four, we'll trace the response of the disciples and the Samaritans, many of whom believed, not only because of what the woman told them, but because of what they themselves witnessed of Jesus in verses 27 through 45.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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