

# WHY DON'T THEY BELIEVE?

John 3:19-21 (No. 20)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

January 29, 2017

## INTRODUCTION

### John 3:16-21

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup>For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

One of the truths meant to startle us in John's Gospel is that when Jesus comes into the world, he wasn't received by everyone, not even by his own people. But instead, he was despised and rejected and few received him and truly believed in him. That's a truth that the more you consider, the more startling it is. God came in the flesh and people rejected him?

He really came down. He really walked the earth. He really proved who he was by doing signs. He really lived a sinless, unimpeachable life. He really fulfilled scores of prophecies given hundreds of years before. And yet most rejected him, especially his own people.

I think the Apostle John never could get over this either. His Gospel starts with such majesty and hope:

John 1:1–9: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."

Here comes hope! The true light was coming into the world! At last, God with man! Here among us! Truth and justice and mercy will surely prevail! And then we read the next two verses and they don't seem to fit our expectation:

John 1:10–11: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."

We read those verses and everything in you cries out, why? Why don't they receive him? And suddenly you're compelled to keep reading because you want to know why the Word, the life, the light would be rejected. There is a glimmer of hope in the next sentence:

John 1:12–13: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

So now we know that to receive him is to believe in him. And some do receive him. In fact, as John's Gospel continues, we begin to meet people who do receive Jesus. There is John the Baptist, who was preparing the way for Jesus and who recognized him as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. There are the first disciples. John and Andrew who are compelled to follow Jesus. Then Andrew went to tell Peter that they found the Messiah and Peter comes to Jesus. The next day Jesus found Phillip and called him to be his follower. And Phillip went and found Nathanael and invited him to come and see Jesus. When he met Jesus, he confessed that Jesus truly is the Son of God, the King of Israel.

These are all examples of people joyfully receiving Jesus. Why would anyone reject him? John continues on by relating the time when Jesus saved the wedding from disaster and demonstrated that he is God by turning water into wine.

Sometime after, to be sure, Jesus did clear the temple with a whip and turn over the money-changers tables. But he did so out of righteousness and the text doesn't say anyone rejected him for it, just that the Jews wondered what right he had to do such a thing.

At the end of chapter 2, evidently Jesus was drawing crowds from all the things he was performing and many were exercising some kind of believing in his name. Up to this point in the Gospel, it seems all anyone does is receive Jesus and that no one rejected him. It isn't until chapter 3 that we meet someone who does not receive Jesus. Here in chapter 3 we meet this prominent Jewish leader and teacher named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus to have a conversation. He gets more than he wanted. Jesus exposes Nicodemus' heart and true beliefs and we read that Nicodemus didn't truly believe in Jesus and did not receive him (vv. 11, 12).

And we wonder, why? How could he not believe in Jesus? We have the same questions for our loved ones. How could they not believe in Jesus? We who have believed in Jesus trust him with all our life. He is everything to us. He is the most beautiful God. He is the most compelling leader. He is the most gracious Savior. We love everything about him. We don't have any complaints against him, no grudges, no qualms.

How could we? He's perfect. We love him and cherish him and treasure him and cannot wait to see him face to face and live with him forever in heaven. We want to give our everything to him in worship. We are only sorry that we worship him so weakly and poorly at times. But we've never been sorry to believe in him. Why wouldn't our loved ones find Jesus just as compelling as we do, just as lovely, just as worthy of worship and just believe in him?

Here in chapter 3, verses 16-21 conclude this episode with Nicodemus. There is some debate as to whether these verses are the words of Jesus or the words of the Apostle John. If they are the inspired words of the Apostle John, then verses 16-21 are Holy Spirit given commentary to bring closure to Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus. If Jesus spoke these words, then Jesus spoke this paragraph to Nicodemus as part of his teaching. It's not easy to discern whose words these are because in the first century they didn't use quotation marks. So where a speech begins and where it ends must be discerned from the context and clues within the text.

I'm inclined to believe—just as the translators of the ESV do—that Jesus spoke these words. Without going into great detail, it seems most likely because there is no obvious break between verse 15 and 16 and the section concludes nicely at the end of verse 21. Either way, these words are God's words written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and are therefore true.

The paragraph begins with the most popular—if not the greatest—verse in the Bible, verse 16, which is a statement about the love of God. In verse 16, we learn that God's love for the world was so great that he gave his Son Jesus to the world. This was a sacrifice of immeasurable weight because of who the Son is. He is Jesus, truly God and truly man. Whoever believes in him will have eternal life and whoever does not will perish.

So all humanity is split because of Jesus. There is no third way. The destiny of some is eternal life. The destiny of others is perishing. And the one factor that determines that destiny—the only factor—is whether one believes wholly on Jesus.

The next verse (v. 17) goes on to explain why God gave his Son to the world. He sent his Son to the world on a mission to save the world. He didn't come to condemn the world, but to save the world. The world is in sin and sin has caused a separation between man and holy God. So God sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. Whoever believes in him is not condemned for his sin because Jesus paid the price for his sin on the cross.

But whoever doesn't believe in Jesus is condemned even now—already—because he hasn't believed in the only name that saves—the name of Jesus, the Son of God. God provided a remedy for our guilt. If we would scorn that remedy, if we would reject that remedy, then we are condemned and our guilt remains and the wrath of God we deserve for sinning against him remains on us and we will pay for it in eternity because in rejecting Jesus, we have rejected God himself.

That brings us back to the question, why would anyone want to reject him? Why would anyone not believe in Jesus and not give their life to the only true God? We learn the answer in verses 19-21. Why do some believe and others do not? What's causing their unbelief and what causes others to believe? We find out in the three verses as Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus concludes.

In verses 19-20, we'll see first the reason for unbelief.

## **I. THE REASON FOR UNBELIEF**

The verse begins: "This is the judgment. . ." Here is the divine verdict, the authoritative explanation. Here's the reason as it really is. First, you must know that "the light has come into the world." The light refers to Jesus. Just as we read in the opening paragraph of this Gospel (1:9): "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." Jesus calls himself the light of the world in John 8:12:

"Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

Jesus is the light because he is God and God is the light. The Apostle John writes in his first letter:

1 John 1:5: "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."

As the light of the world, Jesus is the sum of holiness and truth. He is completely pure and he is the summation of truth.

Colossians 2:3: "[in Jesus] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

John Piper writes: "When [Jesus] comes, the truth about all things comes. The truth about God. The truth about ourselves. The truth about the way of salvation. The truth about what is good and beautiful. The truth about evil and ugliness. The truth about how we ought to live."

As God in the flesh, Jesus came into the world as light, shining truth and holiness into the world and there have been two responses to the light of Jesus. The first one is here in v. 19 and the response is described in stark terms: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light."

Already we've found the answer to the question: why do people not believe in Jesus? The answer from verse 19 is very simple: they love darkness. Darkness refers to man's sinful state. Those who don't believe "walk in darkness." Paul says in Ephesians that before Christ-followers were saved, "at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (5:8).

To be in the dark spiritually is to be in sin. Why don't sinners believe in Jesus? Because they love their sin. Unbelief is an issue of the heart. Sinners love sin. They cherish their sin. They treasure sin. Their hearts prefer their own dark and corrupt ways more than obedience to God. This is the reason why people reject Jesus. When Jesus came to his own people, why did they reject him? Because they loved darkness. They didn't want the light. Why do sinners today reject Jesus? Because they love darkness and they don't want the light. They love sin.

This word 'love' is the same word used in verse 16 to describe God's love for the world. But what a contrast! This love affair with sin keeps them from loving the God who loves them. It gets worse. Not only do they love sin, they are doers of sin.

Again in v. 19: "people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

Here, sin is called evil because that's what sin is. Sin is evil. Sin is treason against God. Sin is rebellion against God. Sinners are doers of evil. Sin is all sinners are capable of.

Paul writes in Romans 8:7-8: "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." By definition sinners only set their mind of the flesh rather than the Spirit. Therefore, according to this verse, their mind is always hostile to God and will not submit to God's law.

When Paul says, their mind cannot submit to God's law, that is a moral 'cannot' not a physical 'cannot.' They can't submit to God's law because their minds don't ever want to submit to God's law. They love darkness rather than the light. As sinners do evil by their sinning, they keep on craving darkness rather than light. And it gets worse still. Sinners love sin, they are doers of sin, and they hate the light.

v. 20: "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light"

Not only do they love the darkness of sin, but they hate the light of righteousness. They are in no way morally neutral. They won't choose light if given the option. They are opposed to the truth and purity of Jesus. They despise the light. The light is revolting. Why is that the case?

The verse continues they hate the light, "lest [their] works should be exposed." If they come into the light, their sin will be seen for what it is. The sinfulness of sin will be revealed. So the sinner lives with a kind of dread or fear. He does not want his sin to be exposed. We want to keep his sin private. To be exposed is to experience shame and conviction. That is an uncomfortable experience for a sinner, so the sinner does what he must to remain in darkness.

You might ask, then why are some sinners so brazen about their sin and so public about it? Very simply, if they believe they are in the company of other sinners, they can sin without fear because darkness surrounds them and their sin won't be exposed for its sinfulness. As a culture increasingly grows to love and parade and applaud sin, man sins in more public ways because they find that even the culture itself is a shroud of darkness.

But Jesus says that the sinner doesn't truly want his sin to be brought to light, because then his sin would be exposed for the evil that it is. So the light of Jesus has come. And the light of Jesus continues to shine through Christian witness and the Scriptures. When Jesus' light shines on someone, they can only respond in one of two ways: They could be convicted of their sin and led to repentance and faith. Or they will be driven further into darkness so that they can avoid exposure to the light.

You may have a family member or friend who is walking in unbelief and you've seen the story of their life unfold in just this way. They may have grown up in the church, gone to church camps, perhaps even made a confession of faith. And then at some point in their life they began to be disinterested in the things of God. At some point they don't even talk about God or want anything to do with church, the Bible, or Jesus. Now they live for the world and live for sin.

What has happened? Only the natural course of natural man. The unregenerated man sinks deeper into darkness. They love darkness and therefore they don't believe in Jesus. The reason for unbelief is the love of darkness. But, thankfully, there is a second response to Jesus coming into the world. So let's look at the reason for belief in v. 21.

## **II. THE REASON FOR BELIEF**

v. 21: "But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Now on the face of it, this isn't a verse about how someone goes from darkness to light. It isn't about the going from unbelief to belief. But the reason for belief is revealed here as we dig into it. This phrase "does what is true" was a Jewish expression that meant 'to act faithfully' or 'to act honorably.' It refers to someone who practices the truth. "Whoever does what is true" is a practitioner of the truth. He says "whoever does what is true comes to the light." Again, this verse doesn't describe the point of salvation. It doesn't describe how someone goes from darkness to light. That is, you don't get saved by doing what is true.

This verse just describes someone who does believe in Jesus and what they do. Namely, whoever believes in Jesus, does what is true and continues to come to the light. The verbs here are present tense and indicate an ongoing, habitual action. The one who believes in Jesus desires to act faithfully, desires to act honorably, desires to do what is true in God's sight. That is, the one who is following after Christ (the doer of truth) has no reason to hide from Christ, and therefore he comes to the light. They have no dread, no fear, no need to be ashamed of exposure like the sinner does. In fact, believers want their works exposed as they come to the light. Why? "so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." The believer wants his works to be exposed for what they are—works that God approves and energizes and that glorify him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his followers, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). We who trust in Christ and do his will don't want the credit. We don't want the spotlight turned on us. We walk in the light in hope that those who see our good works will give God the credit, that God would get the spotlight. God gets the credit because all of our good works have been "carried out in God." In Greek, the words 'in God' are emphasized.

God gets the credit because, but for the grace of God, we would be like the sinner who hides in the shadows. But by the grace of God, he has called us into marvelous light and now we desire to show that we aren't some intrinsically good person, but that without God working in our lives, we would not be coming into the light. Our coming into the light is proof positive that he has done something in us.

The reason for our belief is not some good nature that we always had or that we acquired somewhere along the way with good teaching or a good upbringing or better intelligence. The reason for our belief is only the grace of God. We believe because he has given us that gift.

Just as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8–9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

## **CONCLUSION**

Why don't sinners believe in Jesus? The answer from this passage is they don't believe because they love darkness. Why do some believe in Jesus? Only because the grace of God has given them the gift of belief. All of this properly balances the twin truths of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. If we do not believe, it is our fault. We do not believe because we love sin.

If we do believe, it is God's gift. We believe because he has given us the gift of belief. We are fully responsible, if we do not believe. But God is sovereign to overcome our will bent against him to save us by giving us the faith to believe in Jesus.