

I. The Story of Jesus and Nicodemus

- A. John 3:13-17 . . . No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. [14] As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; [15] so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. [16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.
- B. My primary goal today is to urge us to consider the words, “For God so loved the world” in a way we do not usually consider them. But before we get to that, there are a few other things we will talk about.
- C. Prayer

II. The story

- A. John 3:13 . . . No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.
 - 1. Jesus comes into this statement having just asked, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (vs 12)
 - 2. Without waiting for a response, Jesus continues on and here in vs 13, He verifies that He not only knows earthly things, He also knows heavenly things. And He offers a quote from Proverbs and a self-identification as the Son of Man as proof of what He knows.
 - 3. So lets begin with Jesus’ quote from Proverbs, and to give you the context of the quote I will read Proverbs 30:1-4, “The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle... [2] “Surely I am more stupid than any man, and I do not have the understanding of a man. [3] Neither have I learned wisdom, nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One. [4] Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son's name? Surely you know!”
 - a. It is very reasonable to assume Nicodemus knew about this portion of Proverbs. It is equally reasonable to assume that he

knew the answer to the first half of Agur's question – which is, "What is His name." And obviously, His name is God.

- b. However, it is not as likely that Nicodemus knew the answer to the second half of Agur's question – which is, "What is His son's name?" And this is probably why Jesus provided the answer Himself – by saying, "the Son of Man."
 4. The point Jesus is making is that, because of who He is and where He is from, He is able to tell Nicodemus both earthly and heavenly things.
 5. Without losing sight of the importance of vs 13, I want to point out that the words "Son of man" – when used in reference to Jesus Christ – appear twice in Daniel, 31 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark, 11 times in Luke, 13 times in John, once in Acts, once in Hebrews, and twice in Revelation. When "Son of Man" appears in the Gospels, most often it is Jesus referring to Himself in an indirect way, just as He does here in vs 13.
- B. After telling Nicodemus that He knows both earthly and heavenly things (vs 13), Jesus continues by saying (John 3:14-15) "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; [15] so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."
1. We know what this means, but put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes. Jesus is telling him a heavenly truth, and using an earthly example to explain the truth. Now surely Nicodemus knew the story of the poisonous snakes and the bronze serpent on the pole, which when looked upon would save those bitten by the snakes from certain death. But making the connection between that story and the fact that Jesus had come to save mankind from God's judgement of death by being crucified, would not be so easy.
 2. Now for the sake of thinking about some of the connections between the bronze serpent on the pole and Jesus on the cross. I will read Numbers 21:6-9 . . . The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. [7] So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. [8] Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." [9] And Moses made a bronze

serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

3. It is probable you already see a few parallels between the Numbers story and the Jesus story, so let me add a few more just to encourage you to go further in your consideration of this.
 - a. The God who judges and condemns to death is the same God who provides salvation from the condemnation and restores life.
 - b. Just as the snake brought death and a likeness of the snake brought life, so man in his humanity brings death upon himself while it is the likeness of man – that is, the God-man Jesus – who brings life.
 - c. Just as God did not remove the serpents from Israel's camp yet provided a means of salvation from the snake bite, so God has not removed sin from our world yet provides a means of salvation from sin's deadly poison.
 - d. In both cases, salvation comes only to those who look on and believe in God's provided solution. The presence of a savior is not enough to save us. We must act according to the conditions of salvation.

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

1. As I stated at the beginning of today's study, I want us to consider the words, "For God so loved the world" in a way we do not usually consider them.
2. The most common way of understanding these words has to do with God's great love for us.
 - a. For example, just last Sunday we focused our worship around the theme of God's love for us. Just three Sundays ago, I led us in a communion time where I pointed out the degree or extent to which God loves the world – which includes His love for you and for me. And more than once I have said that one of my favorite hymns is, "I AM HIS AND HE IS MINE."
 - b. And I want to be clear here, it is a good thing to take note of, and to cherish, and to be grateful for God's love of us, as individuals, as a body of believers, and as the church universal.
3. However, there is another way to look at the words, "For God so loved the world." And this other way places the emphasis on God and on the quality of His love – rather than on us and the fact of God's love for us.

- a. In other words, this other way makes God – rather than you and me – the supreme or most important person in relation to His love.
 - b. And this is an important distinction because seeing God in this second way produces a profound change in how we think about God, and in how we live the Christ-like life, and in how we love and relate to and deal with those around us. And this second way of viewing these words also profoundly effects the depth and intimacy of our relationship with God.
4. Now you may be thinking that I am making more of this than I ought, or that there really isn't that much difference between the two ways of viewing the words, "For God so loved the world."
- a. So let me try to show you the distinct and important difference between these two ways of viewing God and His love.
 - b. But before doing that, I want to affirm, once again, that this not about right verses wrong or good verses evil.
 - (1) This is about stages of growth and maturity in the Christian life. In other words, this is about going from childhood to adulthood, or about beginning in the realm of the new believer and growing to the realm of the mature believer.
 - (2) This is about our focus as Christians, that is, going from being focused on the need to be loved to focusing on giving love.
 - (3) This is about who is most important to us when we think our needs or our wants are not being met or cared about.
 - (4) This is about intimacy and depth of relationship with God.
 - (5) And this is about measurable and commendable growth in godliness in relation to how we love, and therefore in how we treat God and those around us – and especially those nearest and dearest.
5. And so with that in mind, let's return to my effort to show you the distinct and important differences between the two ways of viewing God and His love. And to do this, I want to begin with an example from God's word.
- a. First example: The writer of Hebrews drew a distinction between those who need milk and those who can eat solid food. And the implication is that those who need milk are too young or too immature to eat solid food. You can read about this in Hebrews 5:12-6:2.
 - (1) Now the problem Hebrews is addressing is not the fact of the youthful, immature need for milk – as if only the mature

adult's ability to eat solid food is right and good. The problem is remaining in a youthful, immature condition longer than is natural or necessary.

- (2) And why is this a problem? Because we were created – both physically and spiritually – to begin life as immature children (needing milk) who grow up into mature adults (able to eat meat).
 - (3) My purpose for using this picture from Hebrews is to show you that in relation to love, we were created to begin life needing and longing for love – from our parents in the physical realm, and from God in the spiritual realm. In other words, God designed us to begin life focused on ourselves as the most important being in the world and on our need to be loved as our most important need in the world.
 - (4) However, the principle made clear by Hebrews is that God did not create us to remain in this self and need focused condition.
 - (a) He created us to grow and mature into adults who see ourselves, others, and the focus of love in a completely different way.
 - (b) In other words, we are to grow up to a maturity – both physically and spiritually – whereby we are no longer focused on being loved, but rather we are focused on being loving. Or in other words, giving love.
 - (5) Now listen carefully, there is nothing wrong with beginning our physical and spiritual life focused on wanting to be loved and focused on God's love for us. What becomes a problem, is failing to grow to adult maturity. Or to put it another way, what becomes a problem is remaining childish longer than we ought.
 - (6) If you understand this example, then you can understand that there can be a distinct and important differences between childhood and adulthood in relation to God's love for us, and our love for others.
- b. Second example: My second example is not as clear-cut as my first, but it makes the point – so bear with me. It is my experience that most of us begin marriage at a fairly young age. And in spite of our best intentions, and in spite of what we would like to believe about ourselves, most of us bring more selfishness and immaturity into our marriage than is good for the marriage.

- (1) For example, in the beginning of married life, most of us are focused more on being loved than on giving love.
- (2) You can see the truth of what I am saying by the fact that in those early days, months, or even years of marriage, when our feelings get hurt, when we don't get the respect or the concern we believe we deserve, when our spouse fails to show us love in the ways we want to be loved, when we have our heart set on something and our spouse is uncooperative or unsympathetic or resistant, we tend to respond in a way that shows that we believe our needs and wants matter most.
 - (a) For example, when these kinds of things happen, we tend to pull away, or give our spouse the silent treatment, or openly express our disappointment and hurt in angry or controlling, and therefore relationship damaging ways.
 - (b) Why? Because we are still at that place where being loved is more important than giving love.
- (3) The reality is, the perfect marriage can only exist where both spouses make giving love their priority – while making getting love something that is wonderful if they get it, but not necessary for giving love.
- (4) Now this picture of the perfect marriage does not mean it is wrong to want to be loved by your spouse. And it does not mean you should wait until you are fully mature to get married. But it does mean that there is a distinct and important differences between young love and mature love.

D. With those two examples in mind, let's return to the second way of looking at the words, "For God so loved the world." And as I said, this second way places the emphasis on God and on the quality of His love – rather than on me and God's love for me.

1. So why does this matter? What difference does it really make? Let me give you three reasons why it makes a difference.
2. First, the longer we remain at that stage of youthful immaturity where being loved by God is what matters most to us, the longer we will worship, and praise, and express love for God when life is going as we want, while questioning God's love, complaining about what God is doing or allowing, and even feeling angry at God when life is NOT going as we want.
3. Second, the longer we remain at that stage of youthful immaturity, the longer we treat love as something whose quality is determined

by how people treat us, or how well they meet our needs, rather than by love's immovable standard that remains the same no matter how badly we are treated. God loves us according to the immovable standard of love, and according to God's word, we are to love Him and other in this same way. For example –

- a. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27).
- b. Paul said, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Never take our own revenge. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. Do not be overcome by evil (which includes the failure of others to love you as they ought), but overcome evil with good (continue to love them as you ought) (Romans 12:14,19,20-21).
- c. And of course you have heard 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 enough times to know that that description of love leaves no room for putting your needs and wants first, or for degrading the standard and quality of love just because you are not being treated or loved as you wish.
- d. My point here is that the quality and standard of love is changeless regardless of the circumstances. But to live at this standard and level of love requires growing up, that is, moving beyond youthful and spiritual immaturity to adult and spiritual maturity.

III. Conclusion

- A. In relation to love, how do we know we are making progress in growing from immaturity to maturity? We know we are making measurable and commendable progress when loving God is more important to us than being loved by God, and when loving those around us is more important than being loved by them.
- B. In other words, we know we are growing up when we can look at the words, "For God so loved the world," and see God as the most important person in those words and the quality of His love as the only standard of love.
- C. Does this mean it is wrong to want to be loved and cared for? Of course not. And yet there is a distinct and profound difference between being focused on giving love as opposed to getting love. And so I encourage you, keep pressing on toward spiritual maturity, for that is the path to a life that is more abundant, more peaceful, and more satisfying than most new believers and newly married couples can imagine.