

Main Idea: We learn from John 3:16-21 about being light in a world that loves darkness. We learn two realities pertaining to the world in this passage.

I. A worldwide offer (16-18)

- A. God gave His Son to the world (16).
 - 1. If you believe in Him, you won’t perish (no matter who you are).
 - 2. If you believe in Him, you have the life of the age to come.
- B. God sent His Son so that the world might be saved (17-18).
 - 1. If you believe in Him, there is no condemnation.
 - 2. If you don’t believe, you’re already condemned.

II. A worldwide response (19-21)

- A. Some reject the light (19-20).
 - 1. They love something else (19a).
 - 2. They don’t want to stop living the way they do (19b).
 - 3. They fear exposure (20).
- B. Some come into the light (21).
 - 1. They live by the truth.
 - 2. They value a clear testimony.
 - 3. They want it to be known that God has done a work in their lives.

Implications: As we seek to be light in a world that loves darkness...

- 1. We need to see the world as God sees it.
- 2. We must remember that we belong to a kingdom that is not of this world.
- 3. We must be willing to sacrifice so the world will know what God did for it.
- 4. We must keep in mind that reaching the world happens one person at a time.
- 5. We must never forget that we serve the One who can say, “Let there be light.”

“You are the light of the world.” This is our identity, according to Jesus. And our task? “Let your light shine before people.” That’s what Jesus said we are to do. But here’s a complicating reality. We are to be light *in a world that loves darkness*. That is precisely what Jesus said concerning this world in John 3, as we’ll see today.

Scripture Reading: John 3:16-21

What’s true of the world? We’re called to be the light of the world, and we’ve been thinking about the *light* aspect of this charge in recent weeks. But now we need to focus on *the world* aspect. What’s true of *the world* in which we’re called to be light?

Think about the number 24,000 for a moment. Do you know what that number is? It’s the number of children that die somewhere in the world of starvation and preventable diseases every *day*. Hear it again. *24,000*. That’s one child dying every 3.6 seconds in the world, 16-17 children every minute, nearly 9 million children dying every year.²

That’s our world. And this too is our world. There are more than 5,000 people groups on this planet classified as “unreached” and “unengaged.” “Unreached” means there’s not an indigenous community of evangelical Christians with adequate numbers and resources to spread the gospel within that people group. And “unengaged” means that at present there is no church or organization actively working with that people group to introduce them to Jesus Christ who said He is the *only way to heaven*. 5,000 people groups. That’s 1.5 billion people living in regions where nearly every person is born,

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the John series 9/5/10.

² <http://www.globalissues.org/article/715/today-over-24000-children-died-around-the-world>

lives and dies without ever hearing the precious news that God forgives sinners if they put their faith in in His Son.³

This is our world, and Jesus said we are the light of it. So if we let our light shine by doing good works, the world will be attracted to Jesus, and love Jesus, right?

Not exactly. There's something else we need to consider. It's the complicating reality I mentioned earlier. We are called to be light in a world that actually hates the light, and not just hates the light but loves darkness.

We see this reality firsthand. We see it when we walk in the woods and turn over a log, and the little creatures scurry away to get out of the light. Young people, you see it in the lunchroom at school when you bow your head to thank the Lord for your meal, and the next day find yourself sitting by yourself.

What's going on? We find the answer in John 3, in the account of a man who came to Jesus, when? In the darkness of night.

We learn much about the world in John 3. The word "world" appears four times in John 3:16-21 (in verse 16, twice in verse 17 and in verse 19). And as we scan John's gospel, we'll see it 56 times.⁴ The world...the world...the world.

Most of us know well John 3:16, but we'll never appreciate John 3:16 as we ought if we don't see the flow of the whole passage. To understand this text, we need a context.

The context is a conversation that happened one night two thousand years ago between a religious Jew named Nicodemus and Jesus. In that conversation Jesus told Nicodemus that if he wanted to enjoy the eternal blessings of God's kingdom, something had to happen to him that he could not accomplish. He had to be *born again*.

So the subject that sets the stage for John 3:16 is Jesus' teaching about the new birth. We learn about the necessity of the new birth in verses 1-3, the nature of the new birth in verses 4-8, and the evidence of the new birth in verses 9-15.

As far as the evidence goes, Nicodemus didn't have it. He didn't understand (10), didn't accept (11), and didn't believe (12). He saw the Light of the world, but not really. He couldn't see the light, for to see the light you must be born again, and he'd never been born again.

What is the evidence of the new birth? According to what Jesus told Nicodemus in verses 13-15, the evidence is *faith*, and specifically faith that works top-down, inside-out, and even more specifically faith in the person and work of Christ.

And this brings us to our passage. We learn from Jesus in John 3:16-21 about being light in a world that loves darkness. We learn two realities pertaining to the world in this passage.

I. A worldwide offer (16-18)

What's the offer? Jesus presents it in two ways. First, He says that...

A. God gave His Son to the world (16). I know that for many of us, these words are familiar, but hear again the greatest announcement ever made.

"*For God.*" "For" is what scholars call "an explanatory conjunction." That means we're about to hear an explanation of what Jesus just declared in the previous verses. Why did Jesus say in verse 15 that *everyone* who believes in Him has eternal life?

³ David Platt, p. 158.

⁴ John emphasizes "the world" more than any other gospel writer (56 out of 78 times in the gospels).

“For God *so loved.*” We’re talking about an offer that has to do with God initiating the demonstration of His love. God by nature is love, and God determined to put His love on display. For whose benefit? An exclusive few? No...

“For God so loved *the world.*” What does He mean by the “world” here? The word “whoever” that follows indicates He’s not talking about the world system, nor creatures in the world like dogs and horses. He’s talking about *people*, the people of the world, men, women, boys and girls. And of course, these people are sinners, rebels going their own way in His world.

If that’s the case, why are they on His heart? I don’t know. They shouldn’t be, not after what they did to Him. In part, it’s because He created them alone in His image with the capacity to reflect something about Himself.

William Hendriksen explains, “Mankind is like a mirror. Originally this mirror was very beautiful, a work of art. But, through no fault of the Maker, it has become horribly blurred. Its creator, however, still recognizes his own work.”⁵

Quite frankly, He could have thrown His broken mirror into the trash pile. It is His work and He has the right to do with it as He pleases. And that’s what His image-bearers deserved. But He chose another course.

For God so loved the world. What happens when you love the world? “*That He gave.*” So if you love the world, and there’s a need in the world (like children starving to death and unreached people groups perishing without a gospel witness), then you give. That’s what love does. Love takes action. It gives what it has. For God so loved the world *that He gave.* And what did God give to a needy world?

“For God so loved the world that he gave *his one and only Son.*” The Greek is *monogenes*, “only begotten.” In Hebrews 11:17 the same word speaks of Isaac, referred to as Abraham’s “one and only son.”⁶ God gave nothing short of His most prized possession (I use the term carefully), His unique, one of a kind, in a class all by Himself *Son.*

But why? Why such a costly gift? Here’s why. God had an outcome in mind. Notice the purpose clause, “...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” There’s the appropriate response to this gift, “that everyone who *believes.*” Literally, “that everyone who *is believing* (it’s a present tense participle which indicates that the appropriate response to this gift isn’t to take it, unwrap it, and throw in the closet).” It’s to believe with the kind of belief that keeps believing.

This is why we must see this verse in its context. Where do we get this capacity to believe with a belief that keeps believing? We can’t manufacture it. It’s the result of the new birth that God’s Spirit produces.

And when the Spirit produces this new life in a person, what specifically does that spiritual baby believe? “That whoever believes *in Him,*” in God’s one and only Son.

Parents love to hear a baby speak his or her first word. What’s the first word that comes from the mouth of a child of God? Does he or she call out to a generic God? No. He cries, “Jesus!” That’s the evidence of new birth.

And what is it that God gives to such a person who believes in His Son? First...

1. *If you believe in Him, you won’t perish (no matter who you are).* “I give them eternal life and they will never perish,” says Jesus in John 10:28. That’s the plight of

⁵ William Hendriksen, p. 140.

⁶ See also Luke 7:12 (“the only son of his mother”) and Luke 8:42 (“his only daughter”).

every person who's been born only once. He's going to perish. But not the person who believes in God's Son. What's more...

2. *If you believe in Him, you have the life of the age to come.* Eternal life. Unending life. Everlasting life.

There's so much more we could say about this verse (if you are interested in more, check out our website for an entire sermon on it⁷). But what I want you to see now is the worldwide scope of this offer. Lest we miss it, Jesus hits it again in the next two verses.

Verses 17-18—"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the *world*, but to save the *world* through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Ponder that...

B. God sent His Son so that the world might be saved (17-18). Again, the words are staggering when you consider them in their context. Jesus is talking to a Jewish man. In the first-century Jewish mind, when Messiah came He was going to save the Jews and condemn the pagan nations. But Jesus says that God didn't send His Son to fulfill that narrow agenda. Jesus says that...

1. *If you believe in Him, there is no condemnation.* And it doesn't matter who you are. Notice the words...*world...world...whoever...whoever*. The whole planet is on God's heart. That's why He sent His Son. And if you believe in Him you will never experience His condemnation, no matter what color your skin is, no matter what pagan deity you once worshipped, no matter how vile your lifestyle once was. He won't hold it against you if you believe in His Son. And if you don't?

2. *If you don't believe, you're already condemned.* That's what Jesus said. Your sentence has already been declared. All that awaits you is the final execution. Or as the final verse of the chapter puts it, "Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath *remains* on him." For the person outside of Christ, God's wrath isn't just coming, but it's already here and will remain forever.

So here is why the Lord says we are the light of the world. The world is on His heart. That's what this worldwide offer is all about. We are to let our light shine, so the world will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

And what kind of effect can we anticipate from our light shining?

II. A worldwide response (19-21)

How does the world respond to God's amazing offer? Jesus uses the light metaphor and says the world responds in two ways.

A. Some reject the light (19-20). Verse 19 begins, "This is the verdict." The word "verdict" comes from the same root translated "condemned" in verse 18. This is the verdict. This is the condemnation. What is? It's this. Verse 19 says, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

Please realize, my friend, that the condemnation for those who refuse to believe isn't just that they will one day perish. It's the fact that they right now refuse to believe and are choosing to love the darkness.

We do not enter this world in a state of moral neutrality. We enter this world ignorant of God and gladly so. It's not just that we can't see. It's that we love the darkness in which we live.

⁷ It was a Thanksgiving message a year ago entitled, "Giving Thanks for the Greatest Gift Ever Given."

Think of a man who spends five years in prison, hears about Jesus, but rejects Him, intent on getting out and going right back into the same way of living that will likely send him back to prison. He's not morally neutral. He loves the darkness. It's all he knows.

How extensive is this problem? Verse 20 begins, "Everyone who does evil." Who does that include? Who does evil? Who violates God's commandments? We all do, right? And what's true of everyone who does evil? According to verse 20, their behavior problem is rooted in a heart problem. Notice verse 20 again, "Everyone who does evil *hates the light*, and will not come into the light *for fear* that his deeds will be exposed."

Some of you are very burdened for family members and friends who don't know Christ. You've talked with them about Christ, or tried to anyway, but they don't want to hear it. Why is that? Why do people not want to hear about the most amazing gift the world has ever received? Jesus tells us why right here. He says they have three problems.

1. *They love something else (19a)*. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light." Why doesn't your friend want to come to church when you invite him? Why does he refuse to put his trust in the Jesus you trust and love? Don't miss this. It's because he's already in love. With what? He loves *darkness*. That means he loves living his life his own way rather than God's way.

That's what darkness is, life without God. God is light. His Word shines the path of light in which He wants us to walk and live, for His glory and our good. But we don't want that path. We want to stay in the darkness.

God says to get rid of lustful thoughts, but the person in the darkness wants to feed them. God says to seek first His kingdom, but he'd rather build his own. That's why he rejects the light, not simply because it doesn't make sense to him, but because his heart is already consumed by another rival love.

But why? Why do people love cheap substitutes rather than loving the most beautiful Person in the universe? It's like rejecting a free trip to see Niagara Falls and saying, "I've got a picture of it on my calendar. I'd rather look at it." There's a reason for this kind of folly, and Jesus identified it at the end of verse 19, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light *because their deeds were evil*."

Look at the word *because*. There's why people love darkness. It's because their deeds are evil.

That seems backwards, doesn't it? It seems like the verse should read, "Their deeds are evil *because* they love the darkness." And that's true, of course, as Jesus taught elsewhere (Matt. 15:19 "For *out of the heart* come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."). But here He makes it clear that the reason people love other things is because they possess a fundamental problem.

2. *They don't want to stop living the way they do (19b)*. "Because their deeds were evil," says Jesus. This is why they rejected the light.

The truth is, we're all born with a double predicament. We do wicked things because we have wicked hearts, but we have wicked hearts because we refuse to let go of our wicked actions.

Your unsaved friend has a track record, just like you and I once did, and that makes it impossible for him to change and live a God-pleasing life. His past sins are like ruts, and he can't get out, and to make it worse, he doesn't want to get out. This is why no matter how many new year's resolutions he makes, he keeps getting sucked back into the ruts of his old, Christ-resisting life.

I find Barclay's illustration helpful. He talks about a person who loves the symphony and wants to introduce his friend to the bliss of high class classical music. But his friend has never even heard of classical music (he's a bluegrass man—that's my thought, not Barclay's). So the man takes his friend to the symphony concert. What happens? In but a short time, the friend starts fidgeting and looking around the hall, bored out of his mind. As Barclay puts it, "The experience designed to bring him new happiness has become only a judgment."⁸

So it is with the natural man and the message of God's Word. Unless the Spirit of God does something to that person's heart, he or she will listen to the glorious sound of God's offer of salvation, music that is sweet to our ears as born-again believers, and that person will be bored out of his mind, or worse. He might turn his hatred of the music into an all out effort to keep anyone else from hearing it.

So why don't people come into the light? First, they already love something else. Second, they don't want to stop living the way they do. And thirdly...

3. *They fear exposure (20)*. Notice the end of verse 20, "...and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." Why doesn't your unsaved friend want to come to church? Why does he look for ways to stay away from learning God's Word? The answer is *fear*. He doesn't like the feeling of being exposed, and that's what happens when God's Word is proclaimed.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

That's what God's Word does, it shines on the heart like an airport searchlight, and that's what the sinner doesn't want to happen. He's afraid that his deeds will be exposed.

By the way, it's not just the unsaved person who does this. The unrepentant Christian does the same. My Christian friend, do you want to hear a sermon from God's Word when you have known sin in your life? Hardly. So what do you do? You look for ways to get away from God's Word, don't you? You take the overtime. You go to the reunion. You fix that broken drain at the house. You do whatever it takes to stay away from the light that will be shining in your church on Sunday.

And even when you do come to church, you look for ways to avoid having your sin exposed by the Word. And so you take extra duty in the nursery, or look for other ways to stay busy. You might even come into the worship service, but rather than listening, you read your Bible, so you can control the content you'll hear. And most people won't even detect it. You'll appear to them as a normal, hard-working, devoted follower of Christ. But you'll know the truth. You'll know that there's something very specific that God wants to change, yet you refuse.

Why? Why do you reject the light you know you need? It's because you love something else, and you don't want to deal with that something else, and you fear having that something else exposed.

Beloved, I've seen this so many times in my three decades of pastoring, and I've seen it in my own heart too. Let's be honest with ourselves. Why would we continue looking for ways to avoid hearing a message from the One who gave His precious Son for us? That's the way the lost world treats Him. They reject the light.

Thankfully, by the grace of God and because of the new birth He produces...

⁸ William Barclay, p. 139.

B. Some come into the light (21). “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

There’s a stark contrast here. Do you see it? What’s true of those who reject the light? Three things. They love something else. They don’t want to stop living the way they do. And they fear being exposed to God’s Word. And what’s true of those who come into the light? Just the opposite, also three things.

1. *They live by the truth.* “Whoever *lives by the truth* comes into the light.” The ESV says, “But whoever does what is true comes to the light.” Every so often someone will say to me on the way out, “Pastor, God’s Word really stepped on my toes this morning!” Now who in their right mind would choose to subject themselves to something that they know might cause them pain? Here’s who. Those who have resolved to *live by the truth*. Not by the flesh, but by the truth of God’s Word.

And what would motivate them to do that? This would.

2. *They value a clear testimony.* “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, *so that it may be seen plainly.*” ESV, “so that it may be clearly seen.” That’s interesting. Those in this second group don’t fear exposure, but welcome it. They don’t hide from the truth, but embrace it. But why? Notice the purpose clause. They want it to be *seen plainly*. They want it *clearly seen*. In other words, they want a clear testimony that makes it plain for all to see that they value Christ above all this world has to offer. And to take this a step further, they don’t want *anything* to tarnish this testimony.

My friend, the question isn’t whether we can point to a lot of good things in our lives. A clear testimony goes further. The question is whether there might be anything in our lives that would keep people from seeing the beauty of Christ in us. That’s unthinkable to a person who values a clear testimony.

Which means we have a problem that needs constant attention. The fact is, I am a sinner. Redeemed, yes. Heading to heaven, yes. But still a sinner. Every day I battle sin that shows itself in my attitudes and thoughts and desires, and sometimes these unseen sins erupt into visible sinful words and actions.

It’s true. Unlike my Savior, I’m judgmental at times, and critical and fearful, and sometimes I’m unkind and selfish and slow to reach out to hurting people. And since that’s a given, this too must be a given. I need to be coming into the light on a regular basis. Every day I need to place myself in and under the light of God’s Word. Every week I need to be putting myself under the light of God’s Word. Why? So the Lord can expose those sinful attitudes, thoughts, desires, and actions that have crept in. And not only expose them, but set me free from them by the power of His cross.

This is what people who come into the light do. They do it because they value a clear testimony. And why is that so important to them?

3. *They want it to be known that God has done a work in their lives.* Notice what Jesus says at the end of verse 21. “...so that it may be seen plainly *that what he has done has been done through God.*” Or as the ESV puts it, “that his deeds have been carried out in God.” So if you’re a child of God, it’s because God did something for you, right? He’s done a work in your life, namely, He gave you a new birth, a second birth. As a result of that miracle, you responded by believing in His Son and thus received a gift you could never have earned, the gift of eternal life.

This is what He did for you. And this the ultimate mark that it has happened. You want it to be known that He did it! You want everyone to know what He has done, and continues to do for that matter, this good and gracious work in your life. And so as you

live, you put the spotlight where it belongs. On Him. When people look at you, you want them to think well of Him.

So there's a worldwide offer, and there's a worldwide response. It's time to talk about some implications.

Implications: As we seek to be light in a world that loves darkness...

We need to do five things.

1. *We need to see the world as God sees it.* From God's perspective, what's true of the world? It needs a Savior. Sinners need a Savior, right? Indeed, that's why God sent His Son. But that's also why the Son sent someone. Who? His disciples. Jesus said to His Father in His high priestly prayer, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:18)." That means if we are looking at the world the way God does, we'll see ourselves as His instruments to reach the world.

Like Robert Thomas did. I read his fascinating story on *Christian History Timeline*:

In 1865 Robert Thomas arrived in Korea and became, in essence, the first Protestant missionary to the ancient land whose name means "chosen." The following year Robert learned that an American boat, the *General Sherman*, was going to try to establish trade relations between Korea and the United States. He offered to accompany the boat as an interpreter in exchange for a chance to spread the gospel. As the *General Sherman* sailed up the Taedong River toward Pyongyang. Robert tossed gospel tracts onto the river bank as the ship proceeded.

In response, angered Korean officials ordered the American boat to leave at once. Eventually the Governor of the province, Pak Kyu Su, attacked the ship and eventually set fire to it.

As the sailors fled from the boat, the Koreans killed them. Robert had to flee with the rest. He leaped from the boat carrying a Bible, crying out to his attackers, "Jesus, Jesus!" in Korean, offering them the Bible. His head was whacked off with a stroke of a machete according to one account.

But God worked in the heart of the man who killed Robert. Convinced by Robert's beaming face that he had killed a good man, he kept one of the Bibles, wallpapering his house with it. People came from far and near to read its words. A church grew. A nephew of Robert's killer became a pastor.

Today 40% of South Koreans are Christians and the nation has some of the largest congregations in the world.⁹

Do we see the world as God sees it? Robert Thomas did. The world is full of people who are perishing, and we need to see them and let our light shine among them.

2. *We must remember that we belong to a kingdom that is not of this world.* That's what Jesus said in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." Don't get too attached. In the world, but not *of* the world, that's our assignment. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world (1 John 2:15)."

Read Ephesians 5:8-14

3. *We must be willing to sacrifice so the world will know what God did for it.* How are 1.5 billion people in 5,000 unreached people groups ever going to hear about Jesus? Remember, the offer is worldwide. So how will they hear? I don't know the complete

⁹ <http://www.christianhistorytimeline.com/DAILYF/2002/09/daily-09-13-2002.shtml>

answer, but I know it involves *sacrifice*. The sacrifice of time, of money, of sleep, of health, of life. Like Robert Thomas gave.

Are we willing to give our lives, our children, our best church members, our retirement years, and our money so the world will hear? And what about our neighbors? Will we make sacrifices even this week so they can hear? For God so loved the world that He gave. Will we follow His example?

4. *We must keep in mind that reaching the world happens one person at a time.* You are the light of the world, said Jesus, but we must not think of the world in abstract terms. The world is made up of specific people, and we must see them, and let our light shine so these individuals can see it. So let's each ask the Lord to put individuals in our life this week. Neighbors. Waitresses. Students. Bank tellers. And by His help, let's let each of them see our good works and pray that they will glorify our Father in heaven.

We do with the full realization that the lost are just like we once were. They cannot see the beauty of the light. They resist the light. They love the darkness.

So is there any hope? Yes! This brings us to our fifth implication.

5. *We must never forget that we serve the One who can say, "Let there be light."* Think of what God did when He created the world. He does the same every time He causes a blind sinner to see the light of Christ. I want to finish by reading a passage that pulls all this together, and then we'll see a song asking Him to open our own eyes.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Open My Eyes, That I May See (#381)

Discussion in today's community groups: Have two or three people share their testimony of how God in His grace brought them from darkness into the light. Then spend time as a group praying for our community, asking our Sovereign Father to bring people out of darkness into the light.