

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you Lord.

How did we get so turned around? How did we get so mixed up? We live at a time and place in history when church attendance is in decline. I have recently seen the problem put this way. "How are people supposed to accept that God, whom they cannot see, loves, when the Church they can see, does not love them. Christians are known for being judgmental. Too often today people come into a church and expect to be judged for not dressing a certain way. People are judged for not singing the right songs and praying with hands lifted high to the Lord. Instead of singing, "Onward Christian Soldiers," the tune that's on too many Christians' lips is, "We've never done it that way before, and we don't want to change." Christians judge unwed mothers. Christians judge people with tattoos and body piercings. Christians judge people based on race and ethnicity. I don't know that there has ever been a more segregated hour in history than this eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning. How did we get so turned around? Why did we get so turned around? As I read this morning's passage it seems to me Jesus was interested in more grace and less judgment.

Read John 3:16-21

Let us pause to find some common ground. Jesus Christ came to save the world. Amen? **Amen.** Jesus Christ came to save the world and Not condemn it. Amen?! **Amen!** Sisters and brothers, answer me now. Was the world perfect when Jesus was born? (pause) Was the world perfect when Jesus started preaching at age 30? (pause) Is the world perfect today? (pause) Are any of us sitting in this room perfect? (pause) Good morning saints! (pause) Good morning sinners!! (pause) Amen? **Amen.** Aren't we **ALL** sinners in need of God's grace? (pause) Answer me now church; are we not all sinners in need of God's grace?! (pause) Hasn't every one of us broken God's commandments? (pause) Hasn't every one of us failed to put God first in some part of our lives? (pause) Doesn't that mean **WE** need God's grace just as bad as **EVERYONE ELSE**?! (pause) Then who are we to pass judgment on anybody? (pause) And yet, **SOMEHOW** Christians have a reputation for being judgmental. Why do we do that? How did we get so turned around that it has to be our way or the high way?

Listen up now. I'm gonna tell y'all a story. In the hushed quiet hours of the night a man's curiosity got the better of him. He got up out of bed and left his wife and children safely shut up in their home. This man went out into the night because he had a question. He wanted to know about a man, a special man. Some said this man was the Messiah or anointed one. However, the man who got up in the middle of the night was not so sure. Nicodemus went to see Jesus himself – without the crowds and without the other church leaders judging, or trying to trap Jesus. Nicodemus wanted to come to Jesus as a man comes to a man to see just what kind of person he is.

I tell ya. I like Nicodemus. Nicodemus wasn't willing to pass judgment on Jesus before Nicodemus had a chance to speak to Jesus himself. So there it was in the dark watches of the night Jesus and Nicodemus talked. I am sure from Nicodemus' questions in John 3:1-15 Nicodemus didn't like all of Jesus answers, and especially some of the questions Jesus asked Nicodemus. By nothing more than Nicodemus' questions we can see he was really wrestling with who this Jesus guy really is.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus had taken on the responsibility to try to shepherd Israel to follow the Law of Moses, and all 622 commandments in Scripture. The Pharisees sincerely believe keeping all of the Law and all of the commandments would bring a person closer to God, and keep Israel from being deported out of their own country again – this time by the Romans. They all feared the Roman military and perhaps this is one of the reasons why many of the Pharisees had become so zealous for the traditions of their ancestors. However, a person cannot be saved by works of the Law. Amen? **Amen.** No one can be saved by works alone. Amen? **Amen!**

How then are we to be saved? (pause) Here it again my sisters and brothers.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God” (John 3:16-18).

My sisters and brothers, in case you missed it the word **believes** is repeated **four** times in **two** verses. When a word is repeated that often in that short a space of Scripture we had better take notice. No one is saved by works of the law. We are all saved by grace. Grace leads us to belief in Jesus Christ as both our Lord and our Savior – Amen? Amen! Amen?! Amen!!

Now you may be asking if belief alone is all we need then how did all of this judgmental stuff get going? (pause) Where did we get the idea we as Christians have the right to judge anyone? (pause) Believe it or not this judgment stuff is something John Wesley struggled with too. For those of you not in the know, John Wesley is not just a name pastors throw around for credibility. John Wesley is the guy who started this crazy thing we call Methodism.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest who observed there were a lot of people going to church. There were a lot of people who were baptized as babies, and who had gone to church all of their lives, and you know what? Bystanders on the street would never know they were Christians. They drank. They smoked. They spent time in brothels. They lied and cheated one another. They beat their wives and kids. (pause) They beat their husbands and kids. (pause) Yeah. Kids were getting the raw end of the deal. The point is these lifelong church goers were not behaving like Christians. John Wesley observed there were a lot of other people who were also baptized as babies because that's what they did back then, and these people did not live their lives as Christians either. It did not seem to matter if people went to church or not. People were still behaving poorly and calling themselves Christians. Then **THEY** would judge others. (pause and shake my head) Not good. Not good.

Wesley started out with some friends at Oxford with good intentions but behaving very much like a Pharisee. Wesley created this method the small group would follow. They would pray every week. They would attend church and participate in the sacraments every week. They would read Scripture every week, and what it led to was this group being made fun of and called Bible moths or Methodists.

After a lot of trial and error Wesley came to a kind of break down, and break through. Wesley realized salvation was not in the method. Salvation had to come from somewhere else. Salvation has to come through faith in Jesus Christ. This saving faith is made possible only by God's grace. This was exactly what happened at Antioch.

After the Romans started persecuting the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ many of Jesus' disciples left Jerusalem. Some of them were originally from Cyprus and Cyrene. Instead of going and speaking to more Jews about Jesus Christ they began to speak to the Greeks about Jesus Christ. Then a funny thing happened. In Antioch these new Greek disciples were so committed to following the way of Jesus Christ and growing in grace and not works the people began to make fun of them. They called them little Christs, or Christians. The disciples in Antioch did not judge people. The disciples of Jesus in Antioch lived as much as they could as Jesus lived and more importantly they loved others as Jesus loved them. Do you know what happened? Their hearts grew. They grew in love for God and love for others. They had so much love in their hearts that when a need arose, they took money they needed for themselves and collected it to be sent back to Jerusalem because of the famine that

arose in that place. Do you know what happened next? The Church, big "C" Church, grew. The Church grew in love and grace, and dare I say numbers. The church did not grow because Paul and Barnabus judged them. The Church grew because Paul and Barnabus helped people understand and share the love and grace of Jesus Christ with others.

This is a really important point. Love and grace does more to bring people to a saving faith in Jesus Christ than condescension and judgment. The point is so important that for the month of February that's what we're going to talk about. This is the start of a new sermon series called "More Grace and Less Judgment." My prayer for us all is that the love of Christ would be in us; among us, and that we would be moved to do more to share God's love with someone new this week.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen