

The Verse After

When Jay Leno was hosting *The Tonight Show* many years ago, he did a bit about the day after an important date. The one that he did that I remembered was September 5 was the opening day for the National Football League season. September 6, the day after, was the day that the New York Jets were eliminated from the playoff race. This was a time when the Jets were not a very good team and was in last place for several years. While I don't remember if Jets' fans got up in arms over that comment, the bit that Leno focused on was the day *after* a significant date and made a joke of what may have happened on that day after. I have found that when looking at Bible verses, that the verse after a much-liked verse can have as much significance and perhaps even more than the well-liked one. So, in that vein, I would like to focus today's sermon not on arguably the most well-known verse of John 3:16, but on the verse after - John 3:17, "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Since there are very few Bible verses that can stand alone, it would be wise to look at these two verses in the context of the text in which we find them and even look at how the rest of the Bible supports that verse.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a religious leader of the people. He was an important figure at that time and well respected for his teaching abilities. Some may make a point that he was coming to see Jesus at night so that he would not be seen by anyone. While that may have been part of his motivation, the nighttime was when the Pharisees would study, since they had other jobs and responsibilities during the day. This text is a classic example of Jesus talking on one level, a figurative or spiritual level while others are talking on a different, usually more

literal or physical level. Nicodemus only was thinking about a physical birth while Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth. It is after this that Jesus makes the proclamation in verses 16 and 17.

In these two verses, Jesus states the reason for why God is doing what God is doing, namely, God is acting out of love for the creation. God does not see that the creation and what humanity had done to it as a waste, as something that should be discarded in the trash heap and start over again. Recall that during creation, God saw what was made and declared it to be good. God still sees the creation as something that is good and worth saving. God still wants people to have life and not death, the same options that Moses placed before the people before they entered the Promised Land after the Exodus. Life or death. Life is living with God while death is total isolation and separation from God.

In verse 17, Jesus says that He was not sent to judge the world. In 'judging' there is a decision to be made of whether a wrong was committed or not. If a wrong had been committed, then there would be punishment. As we learned in the story of Adam and Eve, that punishment of going against what God wants is death. Jesus, then, is not the judge but the one through whom the 'saving' is achieved. Pursuing this line of thought would take us into the different theories of atonement and is beyond the scope of this sermon. Suffice it to say that Jesus mission is to save the world. This would lead us to conclude that the judging is still left up to God the Father. Elsewhere in the Gospel accounts we do get the sense that there is still a judgement to be made and there must be an accountability and consequences for our actions.

If we keep these two verses in isolation from the rest of the Biblical story, there are two conclusions which we can reach, two diametrically opposed conclusions.

The first conclusion would be that everyone, everywhere, is saved - that there would be no consequences for our actions. It wouldn't matter what we do or believe since we are going to go to heaven anyways. This would lead to a kind of 'Universalism' that would basically say that if a person believes in any kind of a higher power, then they will go to heaven. This conclusion does not consider the part of the verses that stress that eternal life is given to those who believe in Jesus, the Son of God. The other conclusion, the opposite conclusion is a form of exceptionalism that says that only those who state a belief in Jesus are saved. Everyone else is condemned. But God wants to save the world, not just a particular group.

So, where does that leave us? Is God a 'Universalist' where everyone is saved and hell is empty? Or is God an exclusive God where only a select few are saved, those lucky enough to have a pre-punched ticket so to say? While in these two verses we do not see a clear answer and in fact as we have just seen can see both answers, we need to look in the rest of the Bible to see what the 'real' answer might be. Unfortunately, we could point to various texts that support either side of the argument. We could look at places where it does indicate that the Son of God is the One who will come and judge the world. We could also cite Biblical texts that point to an exceptionalist point of view.

Perhaps the best approach that we can take is to trust that in the end, God will sort it all out, that according to God's plan, things will be done they way they are supposed to be done. As they say, that is something above our pay grade. What we have to do is to believe that out of love, God created the universe and out of that love, God wants to save the fallen world. God has provided the means in which we are saved, we do not have to do anything except to believe that God, through Jesus, had done this. It is out of a reciprocating love for God and in thanks to God through

Jesus that we simply do what God asks us to do and that is to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

As we continue in our Lenten journey, may we, both individually and corporately acknowledge and repent of those selfish actions which are life-taking and let the Holy Spirit reorient ourselves to the life-giving love of God.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/NhbpBwzb58M>

Service: https://youtu.be/_qUDvWwChoo