

Welcome / Series Into:

Thanks for joining us today as we continue in the series, ***Greatest Hits***. We're looking at the most well known and loved passages and stories from the Bible together to discover who God is and all that He calls us to. My name is Jon and I'm really grateful for the opportunity to come and get to know you. I hope that today you'll get to know both God and yourself a little bit better as well.

Poorly Written Sentences

I'm the kind of person who loves a well worded sentence. When something is expressed well it shows that someone took the time to make things just right. Now, unfortunately, not everything is well written—especially signage. Sometimes someone puts a lot of work in, but they don't use the best word. For instance, every time I'm at a certain retailer I see this sign, *"Please don't take unpaid merchandise into the restroom."*

I understand that they don't want their items in the bathroom until after we buy them, for security and sanitary concerns. But there's a problem here, it's the words "unpaid merchandise". It implies that I should be paying the merchandise before I take it into the bathroom, *"Excuse me sir, have you 'paid that merchandise' yet?"* Like I could slip a \$5 into the pockets of the shorts I'm holding, and then it would be ok.

They could slip the word "For" in there: "unpaid *for* merchandise" and it would be better, but it would also be clunky. That's why the sign should read, *"Please don't take unpurchased merchandise into the restroom."* You see, something you've "*paid for*" has been "*purchased*" - the sign has an incorrect word on it.

Sometimes the sign sounds right when you say it out loud, but because of a misspelling the sentence takes on a completely different meaning. Like this one works if I say it,

VIOLATORS
WILL BE TOWED
AND FIND \$50

but if I read it correctly, it really seems like getting my car towed might be a good idea? I mean I could finally pay those shorts I'd like to sashay around the bathroom!

Context: Power & Meaning

These little details are why I love a well written sentence. Whether it's William Faulkner, or Warren G, an eloquent line comes at you with power and beauty. Now these lines don't just live on their own—every great line lives between other lines. Every line we love, so

well-crafted, speaks to us not simply because it is a great line, but because it comes from within a context of other words and history.

When Martin Luther King declared that he “*had a dream...*” that line came from the context of racial prejudice and inequality, but it was infused with hope. When the writers of the Declaration of Independence wrote “*We the people...*” it came from within a context where one specific person, King George, was determining the fate of the colonies, and that was all about to change. You see, every great line has a home where it lives, and that home is called *context*, and that context is part of what gives that great line its meaning and power.

Premise Statement

Today we are looking at the most prominent line from Bible. It’s a line so well known that its address shows up everywhere from graffiti to tattoos to man-make-up. Like all great lines, John 3:16 lives within a context and that context supplies meaning and power not just for the sentence, but for how we live redeemed lives as well.

We Don’t Like Context

Now to be honest, we don’t really like context all that much. Even when we like the line, we tend to not like the house it lives in. We often look to take things out of their context because, once we remove something from the place it lives, it becomes much easier to use that great line to serve *our* purposes, instead of the purpose it was crafted for.

You see by removing the statement from its context, it loses the force and meaning that it had, and it takes on the force and meaning that I want it to have. It’s like taking the apple off of a tree and then throwing it as hard as you can at someone’s face, specifically the mouth part of their face. They may get some apple in there, but that person isn’t eating—and the apple isn’t being used for what it was made for.

Example: Philippians 4:13

Now this happens all of the time with the Bible. Sometimes people take a verse, lift it from its context and then use that verse to serve their point. One of the most common is everyone’s favorite sports verse, Philippians 4:13, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” Put it on a t-shirt or wristband, write it on your shoes, and you just need to believe and then you’ll defeat any giant in your way!

The problem is that the verse doesn’t say *I WILL* do all things, it says *I CAN*. It’s talking about possibility not certainty, and more importantly the house that this verse lives in is all about learning to be content in “*whatever situation*” we find ourselves in.

Now mathematically speaking, “*whatever situation*” tends to be losing in more than half of all sports contests. Which means the verse is most often teaching us that we *CAN* lose

and be a good sport about it, because Christ's power is in us giving us the strength to persevere and find joy in someone else's triumph.

Public Scripture Reading:

This week's passage is John 3:16-21 (NLT):

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.

And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.

All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.

This is the word of the Lord

2 Remarkable Stories

Now, for today's verse to have its full power and meaning, we have to look at the house that it lives in, and that's going to take two stories from the Bible that I'll tell very quickly, and during one of them you're going to think, *why is he telling us this weird story?* But hang in there—once we get inside the house, it will be worth it.

#1 Creation Story

In the first book of the Bible, God makes the Garden of Eden and puts people into it. He gives them life by breathing his own breath (Spirit) into them (Eternal Life) The goal is for them to live in perfect harmony with God and one another. Instead, they choose to do their thing, breaking themselves & the world. Immediately we begin to see the effects of their separation from God take place. A power inequity develops between the man and the woman, they become estranged from each other and God. While they are still alive, they are no longer truly living.

From this point forward the eternal creation and eternal life begin degrading. Life becomes marked by self-centeredness and disrespect—strife and contention. Sickness & death enter the earth and people who were made to never die, begin to die; they begin the cycle of giving birth, living a natural life, and eventually dying.

From this point forward, everything that is born also eventually dies. The story ends with God saying that even though humans will begin dying, God promises that He will send someone, someone born here on earth, to break the cycle of birth & death. This story is the floor of the house where John 3:16 lives—the earth and its people are broken, caught in a cycle of birth and death, but someone will be born who will help us live at peace with God and one another again.

#2 Serpent Story: Fast-Forward Few Thousand Years

- The Newly freed people of Israel are journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land
- Moses leads the people but they, like us, want to do things their way, not God's
- They begin blaming God (Freedom) and Moses (Caretaking) for their unhappiness
- God removes His protection, sending poisonous snakes to torment them
- They cry out for forgiveness and repent, and God sends Moses with a solution
- Moses takes a bronze serpent, raises it on a staff, and commands them to look at it
- Those who trust God's plan look at the serpent and are saved and God drives off the snakes

Context

John's biography of Jesus records a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a religious and community leader of the day. Prior to this, Jesus had driven the money-changers out the temple and performed miracles. This angered the religious leaders and made them want to destroy Jesus, but it also demonstrated that He was operating under a different kind of authority. HE claimed it came not from another earthly leader but from God himself. Because of the miracles, they were finding it hard to argue with Him.

One of these leaders, Nicodemus came to Jesus for answers at night, in secret.

During their conversation Jesus explained who He was and why He'd come by using the metaphor of birth. He said that every person who has been born eventually dies a physical death. He's making reference to the first story: birth leads to new people, but they are born with an expiration date. Through birth humans give temporary life to new human beings, but, He said, through The Spirit of God, God gives eternal life to human beings by transforming them.

Nicodemus asks how a person can be "*reborn*" in order to live this new eternal life. Jesus explains new life, being born again, comes when we walk away from old life & begin to follow Jesus in obedience. This is how we get to John 3:16

***"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.
(John 3:16)***

God Loves & Rescues Us

This is the verse that gets plastered everywhere. The main thrust of the verse is that God loves the whole world and He proved that love by sending Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, to earth in order to rescue mankind. It's a lovely sentiment, God loving us so much that He was willing to come to earth to rescue us.

Great Exchange through Belief.

The second part of the verse expresses God's promise of eternal life to everyone who believes in Jesus. This helps us grasp that the saving that God is offering us is from "*perishing*". The implication of the sentence is that the perishing is death, and the saving is eternal life. The saving takes place by believing in Jesus. Let's go to the verse right after that verse.

God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:17)

Salvation not Judgement

Verse 17 builds upon the good news of verse 16 by explaining that Jesus' purpose in coming to the earth was to save it—to offer eternal life, not to come and pronounce judgement upon it, to condemn the people living here. I think verse 17 is key to understanding why Jesus, during His time on earth, was beloved by the common person but despised by the elites.

Elites VS Jesus, the Elite

The elites, people like Nicodemus, spent much of their time looking down on others and condemning them for not sharing their values, opinions, and beliefs. It's still very much the same don't you think? Just check out social media—people who think they're better condemn those who don't measure up.

Social media seems to have two main things to tell you. The first is that you have no common sense if you're a liberal AND you've got no book learnin' if you're a conservative. The other thing is that it tells you what everyone is having for dinner. Both of these things make people feel terrible and resentful. Jesus, though He was the most elite—the Son of God Himself—instead did not come to judge the world but to offer new life to it.

There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. (John 3:18)

Believers: Judgement-Free

John goes on to record that the people who believe in Jesus do not live under any kind of judgement from God, regardless of what they have done in the past. Believers are free from condemnation; we get to live at peace with God and each other because our failures and foolishness are forgiven by God.

Everyone Begins Under Judgement

John then points out why Jesus did not come to announce judgment and condemnation upon the people of the world, and the answer is *redundancy*. That judgement has already been pronounced against everyone who does not believe. This takes me to the house that these sentences live within. Do you remember the first story I told about Adam and Eve? When Adam and Eve broke with God, their rebellion was judged—the pronouncement of perishing, separation and sickness and death for people and the planet were declared at that moment.

Everyone Suffers & Produces the Curse

Every one of us experiences that judgement every day when we experience the pain, suffering and hardship of life. The curse of sin is not simply the reason why people are unkind and uncaring, downright ornery and spiteful to us—it's also the reason why we struggle to be kind, caring, and generous to others.

Jesus: I'm the Promised One!

As a religious leader, Nicodemus would have understood that, and now listening to Jesus, he's hearing Jesus declare that He is the one promised by God to come and deliver everyone who believes from the judgment of perishing.

What Belief Is

Now this brings us to something very specific—it's the definition of what it means to believe in Jesus. For us today, living in the modern era, we tend to define belief as acknowledging the existence of something... as in I believe in Bigfoot, or I believe in Science. This is because in the modern era we rely on evidence to prove or disprove the existence of things.

Step 1: Agreement to Exist

If we can find supportive evidence of something then we believe in its existence. For instance, I don't believe in unicorns. The reason for this, outside of the wonderful world of Lisa Frank, is there's no evidence of unicorns. When I say I don't believe in unicorns, I am

speaking of unicorns existentially. This existential belief is only a small portion of what belief meant to the people of the ancient world.

2000 years ago, when Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus, this small portion of belief had already been covered. Jesus had performed miracles, He had demonstrated His authority over the religious leaders of the day, so in this situation, belief wasn't about whether or not Jesus existed or was mythical—He's right in front of Nicodemus. “*Believe*” has much more to do with what Jesus' existence *means* for someone.

Step 2: Place Confidence In

Jesus and Nicodemus are having this conversation which the Apostle John records in the language of Greek, because Greek was the most commonly spoken language at the time. The Greek word for *believe* used in the conversation is **Πιστεύω** and it means “*To think to be true; to be persuaded of; to place confidence in*”. So, we aren't talking about believing in the *existence* of Jesus, we're talking about whether or not you have been persuaded to place your confidence about life and living your life into Jesus' way, or to continue living it the way you've been living it.

Step 3: Act On It

To demonstrate this, I want to show you a little more of the house that this verse lives in. I want to show you the verses that come right before it

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15)

Jesus knows that Nicodemus would be very familiar with the story of Moses and the serpents, and He uses it to make it very clear what belief means. The people in the story of the serpents were not simply expected to *understand* that there was a bronze serpent on a staff and agree that the serpent represented a solution to their problem—they were to *demonstrate* their belief that God would save them by looking at it. The act of looking proved their believing. **This is what faith is—believing something enough to act on it.**

Crucifixion Is the Sign

Jesus says that He has come to deliver everyone from judgement, and that He will deliver anyone who agrees that He is the Son of God and demonstrates that belief by looking to Him for how to live their lives—to live in obedience to Him instead the broken way of living that we are used to. He declares that He will also be put on a cross and raised up in the air the same way the serpent was. This a sign to Nicodemus that God is again providing a way for people to be saved from the judgement of their own selfishness. Which of course brings us to Jesus' final statements.

¹⁹ And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.
(John 3:19)

We Prefer Darkness

The judgement, that we are perishing because of our self-centered sinfulness is demonstrated by the fact that God's light, Jesus, the Light of the World, came into the world—but in the face of that light we actually demonstrated that we preferred the darkness to the light. Every day we are presented with opportunities to live a life that follows Jesus into the light, or to step away from Jesus and live our lives in ways that bring darkness to our world. Just one cursory look at our world demonstrates this regularly. We prefer the darkness because it gets us what we want.

The Beagles

My wife and I had a beagle for 17 years. Her name was Feebee and she was a great dog. Now I'm telling you that she was a great dog, but that doesn't change the fact that she was a beagle. Beagles have a mind of their own and that mind is directed by their nose.

Feebee had a brother named Lewis and Lewis lived with our friends. They grew up together. Each of them was a wonderful creature, but that nose and mind drove each of them to regularly do things that my wife and I found disgusting. Feebee's nose meant that she was always trying eat everything—even things that had been in the dishwasher for three days. Now she had a food dish, and we put food in it, but she still ate the most disgusting things out of the garbage.

Lewis' nose was a different story. He didn't want to eat everything that smelled disgusting—he wanted to make a bed out of it. When Lewis would get dog-sat at our house, his parents would bring over his bed, but Lewis would regularly make his way upstairs, get the canvas laundry hamper, drag it to some corner of the house and make a bed out of it. He had a bed, but he preferred the stinky hamper.

Our Abilities & Desires Amok

These are perfect illustrations of what we need to be saved from... our desires run amok. Every time we think to ourselves that we need to do better, we need to try harder, we need to stop doing this and start doing that, we usually find ourselves returning to the things we know we need to leave behind.

Lying

Manipulating

Gossiping

Cheating

Stealing

All manner of vice

Sin: The Bed/Meal We Make for Ourselves

Sin is ignoring the food dish to eat from the garbage, because we've developed a taste for it. It's the bed we make for ourselves because we're attracted to the stink. This knowing what is right but choosing what is wrong is the slavery of evil that produces perishing.

All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants. (John 3:20-21)

Relationship to "Light" is a Test

Jesus goes on to declare that our relationship to Him, our relationship to the Light of the World demonstrates whether we want to continue pursuing darkness or to live differently—to be changed by His power.

To run towards Jesus—to place our confidence in Him and His way of living, believe and act as if what He says is true—is to step into the light. It's to live life out in the open, knowing that once we've trusted Him, He no longer holds our darkness against us. We are free and out from judgement.

It's a place of joy where obedience to Him produces freedom from fear and slavery to dark thoughts, oppressive patterns of behavior, and the pain of addiction. The real question is *do we want to keep making a bed for ourselves or do we want what He truly and freely offers us?*

Application Points:

Don't Run From the Light - Run To The Light

- Trust that Jesus came to save you personally
- Place your confidence in Him not yourself
- Act on it: Decide to follow in obedience

Keep Stepping into the Light

- Baptism
- Small Group: Join, lead or host

Share That Light with Others

- Don't do what Jesus didn't do: Condemn
- Do What Jesus did: Invite into Relationship
- Point at Jesus: If Christ is raised up, He will draw others to Himself