

American pastor and motivational speaker T.D. Jakes says life is like having a big ring of keys that opens a single lock that is your best life. You try some of the keys and eventually you get to one that feels different. As soon as you put it in the keyhole before you even turn it, you feel a *woosh* and know it's right. Some people rely on the “you just know” model of decision making. When the right thing comes along you get a feeling. You just know. But the paradox of life is that people are often more deliberate and more careful about the little choices rather than the big ones. Before buying a car, we read all the ratings, check out resale values on the Internet, and so on. But when it comes to choosing a vocation or the person we will marry or where to live, many of the big choices in life often aren't choices. “They are quicksand” says David Brooks. You just sink into the place you happen to be standing.

I might describe the story of Nicodemus up until the day he meets Jesus as “looking for love in all the wrong places.” He was a Pharisee, so mainly he looked in the law. But in the end, it's not about law but about love. I don't mean the kind of love they talk about on the Dr. Phil show. I mean God's number one priority which is to love, not condemn. Jesus challenged Nicodemus to accept the love that God gave to him and the whole world.

What is love to you? An older woman talking to her friends says: *I think I'm married to an archaeologist. I get the feeling that the older I get, the more he loves me.* From a child: *Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all the people all the time in the whole world. There are only four people in my family and sometimes I have trouble loving any of them!* A young man texting his girlfriend: *Sweetheart, if this world was as hot as the Sahara desert, I would crawl on my knees through the burning sand to come to you. If the world was like the Atlantic Ocean, I would swim through shark infested waters to come to you. If we lived in medieval times I would fight a fire-breathing dragon to be by your side. By the way, if it's not raining, I'll see you on Thursday for our date.* Or from Mother Teresa: *I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts,*

*there can be no more hurt, only more love.* So, what are your thoughts on love today? Have you personally discovered love? Have you discovered God's unconditional love for you and for the world?

Today's sermon is simply about that—discovering that God's number one priority is to love; not condemn. Listen again to these words from John chapter 3 that immediately follow John 3:16: *“For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”*

And listen to another lesser-known verse found in *First John* 3:16. *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”* Can you hear how significant love is? I sincerely hope that you do. Think about it. Consider what God did to show you that he loves you. Everything God does is done because he loves you! Everything God does is done *in love* and *because of love*!

We're all in a few relationships or maybe many relationships. Some of these relationships have very little love in them. For instance, I have a relationship with my bank, but I can tell you that I don't *love* my bank; and I'm fairly sure my bank does not love me. It's important for us to understand what is central in each one of our relationships. In our relationship with God, it is God's ultimate desire to show us that we are loved.

Unfortunately, many people do not view their relationship with God as “centered on love” but on other things like money, or fear, or rule keeping, or avoiding punishment, or having the right knowledge of the right things, or living an easier life, or being part of a family, or being tired, or being refreshed, or almost anything other than love. The list goes on and on.

Apart from love, what other things are important for you in your relationship with God? We often make these things more important than they need to be. For Nicodemus in John 3 we are not told exactly what these things are, however, Jesus reveals that Nicodemus has the wrong perspective of God. He has the wrong idea of what is important in a friendship with God. Nicodemus

was no dummy, mind you. Nicodemus knew a lot about God. The point is he didn't truly know God. Again, Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees, an expert in the law. And what do we know about the Pharisees? They loved judging people. They loved to highlight for others how God is likely to have problems with them because they are not doing the right thing or acting in the right way. Nicodemus' whole understanding of God was based on this understanding of how God operates. Maybe you do too.

Jesus kept pushing Nicodemus to have a different perspective on life; a perspective on life that sees God as love; that appreciates God's number one priority; which is to love Nicodemus. God's number one priority is that we would know that we are loved by God, no matter what.

There was a classified ad in the newspaper that read something like this: "Reward offered. Lost dog, brown fur, some fur missing due to fights. Blind in one eye, three legs, slightly arthritic. Goes by name of *Lucky*." I think God has posted the same kind of description for me and for you! He loves us! This does not mean that God won't care what we do or say or that we should ignore what God wants! Nor does it mean that every person will be guaranteed a place in heaven regardless of having faith or not. The fact is, if you do not believe and trust in Jesus, you have already condemned yourself to a life without God.

Let's dig into the meaning of John chapter 3. Jesus doesn't need to condemn anyone who doesn't believe, because they do it themselves. William Barclay illustrates this in his *Daily Study Bible* commentary on the Book of John. He says: "It is quite possible to offer a [person] an experience in nothing but love and for that experience to turn out [to be a condemnation]. It is quite possible to offer a [person] an experience which is meant to do nothing but bring joy and bliss and yet for that experience to turn out [to be a condemnation]. Suppose we love great music and get nearer to God in the midst of the surge and thunder of a great symphony. [Then] suppose we have a friend who does not know anything about classical music, and we wish to introduce her to this great experience, to share it with her, and give her this contact with the invisible

beauty which we ourselves enjoy. We have no aim other than to give our friend the happiness of a great new experience. We take them to a symphony concert; and in a very short time they are fidgeting and gazing around the hall, [acting] extremely bored. That friend has passed judgment on herself that she has [no appreciation for classical music]. The experience designed to bring her new happiness [was] only a [judgment against herself].

Barclay argues, “People are free to condemn themselves. This is also so with regard to Jesus. If, when a [person] is confronted with Jesus, [their] soul responds to that wonder and beauty, [they are] on the way to salvation. But if, when [they are] confronted with Jesus and [they] see nothing lovely, [they] stand condemned. [Their own] reaction has condemned [them]. God sent Jesus in love. He sent him for our salvation; but that which was sent in love has become a kind of condemnation for some. But it is not God who does the condemning; God does the loving; we condemn ourselves.”

This week my word of encouragement to every one of you is to see God’s love in everything and everyone you encounter; to share this love with all you meet; the love that explains why Jesus came to earth and died for you. If you think about it, Jesus’ death only makes sense when we see it through the eyes of love. Barclay gives one other helpful example of how this works: “A man who reacts in hostility to Jesus, loves the darkness rather than the light. The terrible thing about a really good person is that they always have a certain unconscious element of condemnation in them. It is when we compare ourselves with them that we see ourselves as we are. Alcibiades, the spoiled Athenian genius, was a companion of Socrates and every now and again he used to opine: ‘Socrates, I hate you, for every time I meet you, you let me see what I am.’ That is why some people can feel condemned in the presence of Jesus, because they see what they are really like—on the inside.”

To conclude, I have two short stories: Tertullian of Carthage was one of the early church fathers who declared that the one thing that converted him to Christianity was not the arguments people made. He could find a counterpoint

for every argument. But, to quote Tertullian, “It was because Christians had something I didn’t have. The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way they loved each other.”

And the second story is about a pastor, who one day was visiting a farmer and his family. On the visit he noticed a weathervane on the barn roof that was spinning around in the wind. On the weathervane were engraved the words “GOD IS LOVE.” The pastor remarked, “I don’t think that’s a very good way to talk about God’s love. “Why not?” said the farmer. “Aren’t you are saying that God’s love is wishy-washy and changes depending on which way the wind blows?” asked the pastor. “Absolutely not,” said the farmer. “That weathervane is saying, “No matter which direction the wind blows, God is Love. No matter what has happened or will happen, God is love. God’s love doesn’t change.”

This is the two-edged meaning of Jesus’ coming that we can all see in John 3:16 but appreciate more precisely in verse 17. Jesus came in love to save us, to heal us, and to offer us spiritual rebirth. He did NOT come to condemn or to judge. But his coming sharpens the issue in the personal lives of everyone.

It’s up to us to determine which way it’s going to turn out! The invitation is as wide as God’s heart, or as verse 16 says, it is for “*whoever believes in him.*” God will not cheapen or change the terms of his offer, otherwise he would not be true to himself. The choice is quite simple: Accept the invitation that God has given in complete faith and trust or walk away from God and the incredible gift of his “*one and only Son.*”

The first choice brings eternal life and fulfills God’s desire “*to save the world through him [the Son].*” Whereas the second choice brings heartache, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world...*” Remember that God doesn’t do the condemning, we can only condemn ourselves. Our relationship with God in Christ is *centered on love*, the love that was proven to the world in the giving of his one and only Son.

It has been this way since the very beginning. And it always will be. Amen.