

The Theology of Condemnation

John 3:16–21

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The Conversation on the Bus

A number of years ago, the tombstone of my great-great-great-grandfather was discovered in Ukraine. He was a German Mennonite, and he had actually founded a Mennonite community there. When word got out, a group of descendants made the trip to Ukraine to excavate the site and learn more about his life and legacy. On that trip was a very distant relative — the grandson of my great-great-great-grandfather's brother, a man named Edgar. Edgar was not quite an atheist; he was more of an agnostic. And he took it upon himself to be the expert in everything. He was, to put it charitably, very annoying.

On one of our long bus rides, Edgar began to tell me that Christians don't really know their Bible, and that they don't actually know what Jesus taught. Now, if a believer had raised that question — someone genuinely wrestling with their faith, hungering for a deeper walk with God — I would have engaged that conversation joyfully. That kind of question reflects a soul that is seeking. But when it comes from a non-Christian who takes it upon himself to impose his views of the Christian faith upon Christians while he himself does not believe a word of it — I take great offense. Who are you to tell me what to believe when you don't believe anything?

And so the conversation turned into something more like a debate. Edgar's argument was essentially that Christians are presenting a false picture of God. In his words: God is not a God who sends people to hell. If there is a God, all people are saved. God is only a God of love — he does not condemn or judge anyone. This is, more or less, the version of religion that contemporary culture wants Christianity to practice. I pointed him back to the text: the Bible says that in order to be saved, you must believe in the person of Jesus Christ.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

That triggered him. That is exactly what I am talking about, he said. Christians love John 3:16, but they don't know John 3:17. Do you know John 3:17? He threw it back at me:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

All are saved, he said. No one is condemned.

At which point I asked him: do you know John 3:18? Blank face. This is what John 3:18 says:

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:18)

I wanted to add, as a kind of benediction: put that in your pipe and smoke it. I did not. But it was obvious to Edgar that I did know Scripture, and that the theology he had been pushing on believers was false. Here is the truth: without Jesus Christ, we have already been condemned.

Already Condemned

Notice the tense of what Jesus says. He does not say that without Christ a person *will be* judged — as if condemnation were some future event, perhaps after death, where a person’s good deeds and bad deeds are weighed on a scale. That is not what Scripture says. Scripture says that without Jesus Christ, we have already been condemned.

Without Christ, we have already been judged and found guilty. Without Christ, God stands opposed to us — which is just a more polite way of saying we are under God’s wrath. Without Christ, we have already been cast out from God’s presence. Without Christ, our lives and our actions are deemed foul, fit only for the trash bin. Without Jesus Christ, you and I have already been condemned.

And this is not my saying so. This is what Jesus says: *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* And then he goes on to describe exactly what it means to live under condemnation:

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (John 3:19–21)

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus unpacks what it means to already stand condemned. I want to spend our time this morning working through those two verses carefully.

What It Means to Stand Already Condemned

1. God Is Opposed to You

The first thing verse 19 tells us is that to stand condemned is to stand in opposition to God himself. *“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world.”*

What does light do to darkness? When you flip a switch in a dark room, the light destroys the darkness. Darkness has no power in the presence of light. And light is not passive — it stands in direct and active opposition to darkness.

When Jesus speaks of light and darkness here, he is using metaphorical language. The light represents God’s holiness, his righteousness, his purity, his glory — all of which are fully manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. The darkness is evil: it is sin, it is everything that stands opposed to God. And God, by his very nature — in being holy, righteous, and pure — opposes all that is evil. Do you believe that God opposes evil? Of course he does. He would not be God if he did not. The theological term for this opposition is *wrath*. As the very last verse of John 3 puts it:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3:36)

Wrath is God’s utter opposition to all that is evil. It describes not only his posture toward evil but the fact that in his very being he is working against it, pushing back against it, destroying it. The light is shining.

Let me try to pull this out of the theological realm and put it into everyday life for a moment. What does it actually look like to live already condemned?

I believe that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, and that at the moment of creation — the very first act of creation — God said, *“Let there be light,”* and there was light. Mind you, this was before the sun was made. And if I apply the symbolism of that first light — God’s holiness, righteousness, and purity — to that original act of creation, I reach this conclusion: all of creation is built upon an absolute moral truth, a genuine right and wrong. Stitched into the very fabric of the universe is a morality. The universe itself is, at its foundation, moral.

Therefore, just as there are laws of nature — and if you break those laws, creation stands opposed to you — there are also moral laws woven into this creation. When we choose to live contrary to them, we damage ourselves, to the point of death. It may not happen as quickly as choosing to stop breathing, but the end result is the same.

And we see this all around us, even if we don't always use that kind of language. We talk about it like this: *You know Joe. He has made some bad life decisions.* At sixteen his girlfriend was pregnant, he dropped out of high school, he couldn't hold down a job, he started disrespecting authority — and if he doesn't choose to turn things around, what happens? It gets worse. Drugs. Theft. Prison. He encounters people even further down the road than he is. He gets out, and his opportunities are limited, his prospects are narrow, his life is hard and depressing and joyless. That is an extreme example, but we see versions of it everywhere. In the very fabric of creation there is a pushback against evil. God, by his creation and by his very being, opposes what is wrong.

To stand already condemned means, first of all, that God is opposed to you.

2. You Are Separated from God

Reading on in verse 19: *“people loved the darkness rather than the light.”*

When a person loves the darkness rather than the light, it means that he or she is at war with God — *I don't want you, God.* To stand already condemned means to be in rebellion against God, outside of relationship with him. Theologically, we call this separation. And we experience it, in everyday life, as a hardening of the heart — as anger, as bitterness, as a feeling of deep isolation and loneliness.

You were made for God. You are made complete in him. When that relationship is broken — when there is a separation — your very soul cries out in anguish: in anger, in bitterness, in loneliness, and in this deep, unmet longing that you cannot quite name or explain. This is how people experience being already condemned, outside of a relationship with Christ.

To stand already condemned means to be separated from God, because you are in direct rebellion against him.

3. Your Life and Actions Are Worthless

Reading on again in verse 19: *“people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil.”*

The word *evil* here is a moral judgment. This is wrong. This is contrary to God's truth and contrary to the very fabric of our universe. Jesus also uses a second word in verse 20: "*everyone who does wicked things hates the light.*" The Greek word translated *wicked* there is *phaulos* — and it means foul, trash, garbage, worthless.

To be already condemned means that one's life and actions are deemed worthless, trash, foul, garbage — fit only for Gehenna, the landfill outside Jerusalem where the city's refuse was burned in Jesus' day. It is no accident that Jesus used the word *Gehenna* to speak about hell. To stand condemned is to be treated as fit only for the rubbish heap.

And it is this *phaulos* — this worthlessness — that we feel when people condemn us, or when we condemn others. The person who is judged and condemned feels worthless, foul, cast aside, like trash. This is why there is so much pressure in our culture not to judge or condemn people — because everyone instinctively knows how devastating that feeling of worthlessness is.

But here is what Jesus is actually saying: that our experience of worthlessness, our sense of having no purpose, our struggle with isolation and shame and feeling broken and rejected — these things are not primarily a cultural problem. They are the result of living in rebellion against God, of being separated from God.

This is why verse 17 says: "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world.*" The Son was not sent to condemn the world, because the world already stands condemned. We have done it to ourselves — and we know it.

Therefore — God sent the Son to save the world. To remove this condemnation from you. That is why the Son is sent.

No Longer Condemned

“*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”
(Romans 8:1)

What does it mean to no longer stand under condemnation?

It means you are no longer at war with God. There is peace — not a false peace, not a superficial calm, but genuine peace in all situations. It means you are no longer separated from God. It means that God is no longer opposed to you — that there is a real and present hope in this life, that everything you are going through, good and bad, is held in God's hands. He sees it. He is at work in it. Even when you mess up, God says: *I've got this*. And there is a hope for the future — an eternal life that extends beyond this one.

It means that your life is no longer marked by purposelessness, but by purpose, meaning, and value. What you do matters.

This is what it means to no longer stand under condemnation.

The Table

This morning we come to the communion table. This is the time when we remember and recognize not only that we are no longer under condemnation, but *how* Christ, the Son, actually saved us — how he delivered us from condemnation.

The answer is simply this: he himself became condemned for us. He took our condemnation upon himself.

Our separation from God — *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

God’s utter opposition to evil, his wrath — poured out on him.

Our lives deemed of no value — crucified among criminals, outside the city gates, very near that landfill of Gehenna itself.

He took our condemnation and gave us in return his salvation, his righteousness. That is what he did.

How do you receive it?

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36, NIV)

Come this morning to celebrate that you are no longer under condemnation.