**John 3:14-21 (ESV)**

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** 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. **18**  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. **19**  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. **20**  For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. **21** 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.”

**“God’s Love Set Apart To Save”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. The world has its way of love, but it is a love cut off from God. Yes, love seems to be one of the most tossed around words today, but it also appears to be doing the most damage. It can serve selfish goals as when someone says, “You don’t really love me unless…” It can be an expression of judgment stating, “They are not very loving people.” It can end up being a painful shock like when a person hears, “I don’t love you anymore, I want a divorce.” It can be just plain demanding, “If you do not do this, this, and this I will not love you.” Finally, it might sound loving, but is it when the word love is not even used in a sentence such as, “I don’t care, do whatever you want.”

Lent offers another love that the world would never toss around nor knows anything about. There is a love from God set in the way of the cross. One of the most famous texts on the Gospel is what we heard from St. John this morning. It happens to be not without importance that when Jesus proclaimed such saving love from God. He was also in the presence of a Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one who considered himself a loving person. Yet, Jesus while discussing the topic of being “born again” gave no glory to the will of the flesh or the will of man, but only to the will of God’s love. He said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Lent leads us finally to ask this one question, “Can there ever be love greater than what God gives to save sinners?”

God’s love is an unconditional commitment. Humanity has never imagined or determined love like this. It is why no one else other than Jesus could speak without hesitation as the Savoir saying, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Here we have the promise that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has put Himself completely into saving humanity. Few are committed to anything be it marriage, church, or country, but “unconditional” commitment? God deciding to save the world has never fit the standards of men. He loves that which would never have the same commitment to Him. “This kind of love is more than a feeling; it’s a resolve…It doesn’t base its actions on how likable or worthy the object of love is; it acts in the interest of its object.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Father sending His Son to die on the cross means God has our best interests in mind by the Gospel. St. Paul said, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

God’s love is nothing less than unbelievable. Just as the bronze serpent on the pole was a judgment that saved, so Jesus suffering on the cross is the judgment to save a sinful world. The sight of it all can easily appear as if God is the enemy. Jesus does not suffer punishment for His sins, but yours and that of the whole world. Yet, the promise remains that He is not against us. “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.” The Son of God has not come to pour salt on the open wounds of our sin and death. The Law is what crushes the loving works of sinners no matter how upright or reckless they may be. Jesus said, “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope” (John 5:45). In other words, without the sacrifice of Jesus, sinners seek glory in their love and not the love of God given for us to believe in His Son. St. Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

God’s love means to have a life before Him who loves us. If all this is so true, why do so few believe in the name of Jesus in the world? Why do so many hate the Word and despise the Sacraments? What could possibly be standing in the way of God’s love that He wants freely to give sinners? Jesus told Nicodemus the answer, which He would see at the cross as Jews and Gentiles alike, would denounce and reject the love of God’s Son. He said, “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.” What is this exposure? To be called a sinner in my life, to face the need to repent and believe in Jesus, to deal with a love that points away from sin to the better Savior. St. Augustine says this, “People love truth when it shine on them and hate it when it rebukes them…People love truth when it reveals itself and hate it when it reveals them.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Dare we be ashamed to stand before each other needing forgiveness, needing relief from God’s Word of truth, needing Christ the light for the baptized? What did Jesus say, “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.” What it means is a life that is just plain honest. It is to serve God rightly in what He says, but also to believe even more in Christ who still comes to be Savior for me.

Can there ever be love greater than what God gives to save sinners? The world would like to think differently considering the love God shows is by the cross. However, Nicodemus had the blessing of faith not only to speak up for Jesus’ love against the falsehearted Pharisees (John 7:51-52). He would also be present at the love of God’s sacrifice help to burying Jesus’ body after His death (John 19:39). If the world has love, it is only love cut off from God. The word may be tossed around more today, but it is no less dangerous. Whereas God has love that cannot be cut off, because it rest on the sacrifice of Christ as Savor. What God tosses around by the words of the Gospel is to save sinners from the danger that we are already in of sin, death, and the Devil. The crucified Jesus holds a word of forgiveness for you to believe. His sacrifice has a promise to restore distressed sinners to receive the Sacrament. Lift up your hearts for God lifts up His Son to save a sinful world. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.

1. People’s Bible Commentary 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ancient Christian Commentary on John 3:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)