

Who Is Condemned?

I think it was in seminary, maybe even in my preaching class, when I first learned that virtually any biblical text has both bad news and good news. It may be explicit and obvious, or it may be implicit, hidden. Part of the preaching task is to find—and then preach—both the bad news and good news.

From the first time I read today's passage this past week, I was overwhelmed by its bad news. I was sorely tempted to simply skip it, to jump straight to Chapter Four in my sermon series on the Gospel of John. That passage tells the dramatic story of the Samaritan woman at the well (where Jesus tells her, among other things, how many husbands she has had); it's a fun story to preach on. But something—maybe stubbornness—made me stick with this text. A sense of challenge, perhaps. Or maybe obligation—a sense that, as much as I might want to, I can't hide from the bad news.

I'm talking especially about verse 18, and its emphasis that while those who believe in the Son of God are saved, those who do not are condemned. I don't know about you, but I don't want to believe in a God who saves some and condemns other. Granted, if I'm honest, there are people in this world that I would like to condemn. God forgive me, but our president is one of them. (I really appreciated Hillsboro High School English Teacher Bob Woelk's column in this week's Hillsboro Free Press, where he took President Trump to task for his immoral behavior.) But when push comes to shove, I don't want to believe that anybody is condemned. Especially if God is doing the condemning. And especially if it means that only we Bible-reading Christians are going to heaven. Which seems pretty self-righteous and therefore unbiblical.

And then there is verse 36, and that word phrase "God's wrath." I don't like it. I don't want to believe in a wrathful God. Granted, it was my choice to add this verse onto the end of today's passage. I guess I figured I might as well just deal with it. Then next week I can preach on the Woman at the Well with a clear conscience.

Let's talk about the word "condemn," another word I particularly like. The verb is *krino*, in Greek. It means "to judge, pass judgment on, come to a decision, sentence, hand over for punishment, condemn." In its passive voice, as we have twice in verse 18, it means to be condemned, to be judged, to be handed over for punishment. And presumably God is the one doing the condemning. And of course, in a passage that also talks about eternal life, one can only assume that the punishment or sentence referred to is its opposite, namely "eternal death." Otherwise known as hell. So, it's very simple, really. Those who believe in Jesus go to heaven, and those who don't go to hell. Where, according to verse 36, they must endure God's wrath. Presumably forever.

And no matter how much we or I might want to, we can't remove this language from the Bible. All we can do is unpack it the best we can, so that we at least understand what it is saying, the best we can. Even if we don't like it.

What behavior, what act, what state of mind or spirit is so despicable as to merit eternal punishment? John says, in the second half of verse 18: "Because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." I have to be honest with you. I don't understand what this verse means. Assuming the referent is Jesus, what does it mean to believe in Jesus? Believe that he is real? That he exists? To believe in his power as the Son of God?

Or, might it mean “to believe what Jesus says?” Which, being the only Son of God, ends up being the very words of God? Which reminds me of the saying “We believe that Jesus meant what he said, and he was talking to us.” A saying near and dear to Anabaptist Mennonites, and our emphasis on following Jesus. Which would typically take us straight to such teachings as we find in the Sermon on the Mount.

But that’s in Matthew, not John. If we stay in John, what we find in the very next verse is this: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

Their deeds. Things people do and say and think. How they live. Sounds a bit like the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, uncomfortably, John doesn’t specify what these deeds are, except to say they are evil. So how do we know that these deeds aren’t our deeds? That he’s not talking about us? That’s the slippery thing about darkness. It’s easy to hide our evil deeds—hide them from God, from others, from ourselves. As John says in the very next verse, “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

I couldn’t help but think this past week about the impeachment trial, and the deplorable fact that virtually no witnesses were called to testify. Making it pretty clear, to me at least, that somebody is hiding something. Whether it’s the President, or the Senate, or the radio talk show pundits. And so I find myself wanting to pray for light—illuminating, blinding light—so that his and their deeds may be exposed for what they are. But then I remember that my deeds would be exposed as well. Maybe I don’t want that blinding light after all. I don’t want to be one of the condemned. So what is the “good news” here? That it’s best to keep everything hidden by darkness, and as long as we do so then everything will be okay?

One thing seems clear in verse 18. It is our own acts which condemn us. As John says, “those who do not believe are condemned already.” In other words, maybe it’s not God who condemns us. We condemn ourselves, specifically by choosing not to believe. Is that good news? Or is that still bad news?

Last week I focused particularly on verse 16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Which as I pointed out is the first time the word “love” appears in the Gospel of John. Now that’s good news. Do you remember the picture I showed, with God’s arms wrapped tightly around the world? Someone raised the question in the sermon discussion class last week whether God was hugging certain continents more than others. I told them I don’t think so. I think it’s pretty clear he’s hugging and loving the whole world. And we can’t and musn’t try to eliminate a single person from God’s embrace.

The good news that seems tailored specifically for today’s passage is in the very next verse. “Indeed,” Jesus begins. Which is like taking the previous verse about God’s love for the world and then shining an even brighter light on it. “Indeed [spotlight!], God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” It is not God’s will, or desire, or plan, to condemn anybody. Whether it’s President Trump . . . or Pastor Tom. Like I said, it is not God who condemns us. God has tried and is still trying to save us. We condemn ourselves. So is that bad news? Or is that good news? Yes.

And what are we to do? Jesus tells us in verse 21. We are to “come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their—our—deeds have been done in God.” Not in the name of someone or something else. Not in the name of money, or ego, or fame, or political party, or self-protection, or just plain old self-satisfaction.

So let us all come to the light. No more hiding. It's time to fess up.

Amen.

Questions for Pondering and Discussion

I said at the beginning of my sermon that any biblical passage will have both bad news and good news. Shall we test it? Think of a Bible verse—what is the bad news and the good news?

What, for you, are some of the “bad news” passages in the Bible?

What do you think of the idea of an angry, wrathful God?

What do you think of the word “condemn?” Should we avoid using it?

Do you believe that those who don't believe in Jesus go to hell? Why or why not?

What kinds of deeds do we tend to do in the darkness?

Why do we think keeping these deeds hidden make them okay?

What is the difference between God condemning us and us condemning ourselves?

What is the difference between us condemning others and God condemning others?

Do you believe God is still trying to save us? Why or why not?

If we are honest, in whose (or what) name do we do at least some of our deeds?