The Gospel of John: *The Cross-Examiner*
John 16:4b-11
Lead Pastor Jim West

On May 25th of 2020, in the city of Minneapolis, a man named George Floyd died. People die every day, and we know little about those deaths, but this man’s death was felt around the world. Why? Because most of us, thanks to social media, watched an amateur video of George Floyd as he struggled to breathe under the knee of Officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt upon his neck for eight minutes and fifteen seconds. Floyd was visibly struggling, and we even heard him cry out, “I can’t breath!” I remember when I watched the video for the first time feeling like it was the longest eight minutes and fifteen seconds of my life. I literally shouted at my computer screen, “Get off the guy! What are you thinking? He’s in handcuffs…why are you still kneeling on his neck?” And then George Floyd stopped moving, and we learned that he was pronounced dead just minutes later. Now…I know that many people have very strong opinions about the media coverage and the rioting that went down later that day and in the weeks that ensued. Our nation was quickly divided over the organization called Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory and all the political commentators. There are some who now debate whether George Floyd even died as a result of the officer’s weight on his neck or by some other cause. All that aside, I would ask you to think back to May 25, 2020…or whenever you first saw that video, because I suspect most of us—white people and black people, Christians and atheists, Republicans and Democrats, policemen and civilians--when we first watched that video…thought to ourselves: “That’s just wrong.” We almost universally believed it was wrong for that police officer to kneel on the neck of a man in handcuffs for eight minutes and fifteen seconds. It was wrong that a man accused of passing a fake $20 bill was now dead due to what we perceived to be the careless actions of a man called to serve and protect.

As a nation, and even throughout the world, we found ourselves in the unusual position of moral agreement on May 25, 2020: we universally agreed that what we saw on that video was a sin. It was wrong…it was a breach of the moral law as well as the law of the land…it was a sin against humanity. This universal conviction of sin then revealed our universal conviction about righteousness, right? An officer who was doing the right thing would have detained George Floyd and then put him in the police car…that was the right or righteous thing to do. And then, having determined both sin and righteousness, we all made a judgment of some kind. We all likely judged that Officer Chauvin should be put under investigation for wrongdoing. He should be held accountable for kneeling on that man’s neck for eight minutes and fifteen seconds…the officer should be held accountable that George Floyd was now dead because of his sinful behavior.

And there you have it: sin, righteousness, and judgment. These words so commonly used in the Church remain functional, everyday realities that all people employ, regardless of country, color, or creed. Why? Because human beings are hopelessly moral creatures, and that observation was on full display on May 25, 2020. As secular as some may perceive our current culture, we are still quite preoccupied with sin, righteousness, and judgment, right? Every time we cry for justice; every time we condemn the behavior of others; every time we feel hurt and betrayed…we are employing the same three concepts over and over again: sin, righteousness, and judgment.
As we return to the 16th chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus has just announced that the Helper, the Holy Spirit, is coming for those who belong to Jesus, and this morning Jesus will reveal how the Spirit of Truth will work through the disciples to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Our text is John 16:4-11; please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. 5 But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ 6 But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. 8 And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; 11 concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

My message is entitled The Cross- Examiner, and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Good in His Going; 2) The Threefold Conviction; and 3) The Verdict.

I. The Good in His Going

As we pick up the teaching of Jesus in vs. 4, Jesus states, “I did not say these things to you from the beginning because I was with you.” If you are joining us for the first time this morning or you missed a few Sundays, you may be wondering, “What are these things” that Jesus did not say to the disciples from the beginning…?” If you have your Bibles with you or your Bible app on your phone, you’ll see that in the latter part of John, chapter 15, Jesus has been warning His disciples about the certain persecution and opposition they will face when Jesus is gone. In fact, Jesus just said in vs 2 “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” Jesus has not pulled any punches…He has been honest about the challenges the disciples will face; and these are new challenges for the disciples. Why? Because Jesus has been with them; and so far the disciples have not personally experienced this kind of opposition or persecution. Jesus has been their Lord and their Protector; they have been protected by His bodily presence and power. But soon Jesus will be leaving them, and life will get hard in a hurry once He’s gone.

Not surprisingly then, Jesus reveals the general mood of the disciples on this dark night in vs. 6, “Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.” The disciples are depressed, and can you blame them? So far the news has not been very good, right? Jesus is going where they cannot follow; and then severe persecution will come upon the disciples in His absence…sounds pretty depressing to me!

I’m sure Jesus gets why His disciples are so depressed, but He observes with a bit of frustration: But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you ask me, “Where are you going?” In other words, the disciples are only thinking about themselves. They are afraid; they are sad; they are pessimistic about how the absence of Jesus is going to affect them…but they’re kind of missing the point, right? If they were to give some serious consideration to WHERE Jesus was going, they would have reason to be encouraged. Jesus is going to the Father! Jesus will soon sit at the right hand of God as the glorified Son! There are some advantages to Jesus going for those who love Him; and of course, Jesus says exactly that in vs. 7, “Nevertheless, I tell you the
truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.”

Church, most of us who love Jesus lament that we have never had the wonderful opportunity to see and know Jesus in the flesh. We read the four gospel accounts, and we begrudge the disciples for their exclusive access to our Lord for three years. I must confess: I often long to feel the arms of the Lord wrap around me; I long to meet Him in person; and I often dream of what that will be like when I finally breathe my last see Him face to face. I think it’s pretty natural to feel that way. However, according to Jesus, those who have the Holy Spirit here on earth are in the advantage over those who walked with Jesus in the flesh for three years! Why? NT scholar William Barclay writes:

When Jesus was in the body, he could not reach the minds and hearts and consciences of men everywhere, he was confined by the limitations of place and time. But there are no limitations in the Spirit. Everywhere a man goes the Spirit is with him. The coming of the Spirit would be the fulfillment of the promise: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” The Spirit would bring to men an uninterrupted fellowship forever.

This is good news indeed…if it’s true, right? I mean, think about it: how crazy it is to tell your followers that you will be more with them after you die than when you are physically in their presence? And how often do movements IMPROVE when the leader and founder of that movement dies? It’s pretty rare, right? It’s usually just the opposite: movements typically die with their leaders. Yet Jesus promised His “going” would add rocket fuel to the ministry, because He wouldn’t be dead: He would be with the Father, and He would send the Holy Spirit! So, let’s ask the question: did that happen? Did the movement of Jesus take off like wildfire after His public execution? Yes. How do we account for that? Jesus isn’t dead! Jesus is alive, and Jesus did send the Holy Spirit as we read about in in Acts 2, and the expansion of God’s Kingdom on earth in Jesus’ name continues to grow to this day.

Maclaren marvels:

So singular and solitary is His relation to us that the thing which ends the work of all other men, and begins the decay of their influence, begins for Him a higher form of work and a wider sweep of sway. He is nearer us when He leaves us and works with us and in us more mightily from the throne than He did upon the earth. Who is He of whom this is true? And what kind of work is it of which it is true that death continues and perfects it?

This observation is clearly what Jesus predicted. While Jesus walked the earth, the Gospel was only partly accomplished; for only His death, resurrection, and ascension would complete the Good News of the Gospel! It is only when Jesus goes that the Spirit can come and ignite the greatest movement the world has ever known! And, we know, don’t we, that Christianity was met with violent and deadly opposition both from the Jews and the Romans for the first 300 years, just as Jesus predicted…and yet Christianity swept through the ancient world like a wildfire. If you are an honest skeptic of Christianity, you must attempt to give an account for the rapid growth of Christianity during the first 300 years following Christ’s public execution if not for His resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. I can tell you now, there truly is no reasonable, alternative explanation. Many have tried, all have failed. Christianity should have died when Jesus breathed His last on the cross; the movement should have crumbled under such severe persecution; but history reveals that there was, in fact, “good in His going.” The death of Jesus was only the beginning. Three days later the tomb was discovered to be empty, and
multiple witnesses came forward to say, “He is risen!” A few weeks later, a mighty wind swept through an upper room in Jerusalem; simple men were proclaiming Jesus in languages they could not possibly have known; and by the end of the day, thousands were being baptized in His name. Church, Christ has risen! The Helper has come! Thanks be to God!

II. The Threefold Conviction

Here in the 16th chapter of John we learn more about the work of the Holy Spirit than in any other part of the New Testament. We will consider the first work part of His work today, and the second part of His work next week. Here in our text, Jesus articulates how the Holy Spirit will first bring conviction to the world. In vs. 8 Jesus states, “8 And when he comes, he will conv"t the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

Let us first note that the Greek verb elegchow used here for “convict” is a legal term that often means to cross-examine, convict, or convince.

Barclay writes of “elegchow”:
The trouble is that no one word can translate it adequately. It is used for the cross-examination of a witness, or a man on trial, or an opponent in an argument. It has always this idea of cross examining a man until he sees and admits his errors, or acknowledges the force of some argument which he has not yet seen. Such cross-examination can do two things—it can convict a man of the crime he has committed or the wrong he has done; or it can convince a man of the weakness of his own case and the strength of the case which he has opposed. In this passage, we need both meanings, both convict and convince.

1) The Conviction of Sin

With that in mind, the Holy Spirit first cross-examines and convicts the world of sin. Now, as formerly mentioned, even the most secular person is quick to accuse others of “sinning” when they encounter injustice. Thus, the Holy Spirit is not coming to simply convict the world that there is sin or that the world is guilty of sin; instead, the Holy Spirit comes to convict the world of the ultimate sin. Jesus explains it this way in vs. 9: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me;

We touched on this subject last week, but it bears repeating. According to Jesus, those who do not believe in Him are guilty of the most egregious sin. Why? Because to reject the Son is to hate the Father (John 15:24), and to hate the Father is to commit treason…it is a very serious sin indeed. This makes sense when we remember how Jesus articulated the first and greatest commandment in Matthew 22: “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind”…right?

Now, there are many horrible sins in the world as you well know. Most of us would hardly equate the sin of unbelief with rape, child abuse, or genocide…so we may be wondering why Jesus would present unbelief as the most egregious of all sins.

Maclaren speaks to this objection:

Some of us do not think that [unbelief] is sin at all; and tell us that man is no more responsible for his belief than he is for the colour of his hair, and suchlike talk. Well, let me put [forth] a very plain question: What is it that a man turns away from when he turns away from Jesus Christ? The plainest, the loveliest, the loftiest, the perfectest
revelation of God in His beauty and completeness that ever dawned, or ever will dawn upon creation. He rejects that. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from the loveliest human life that ever was, or will be, lived. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from a miracle of self-sacrificing love, which endured the Cross for enemies, and willingly embraced agony and shame and death for the sake of those who inflicted them upon Him. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from hands laden with, and offering him, the most precious and needful blessings that a poor soul on earth can desire or expect.

The fugitive Israelites in the wilderness said, ‘We do not want your light, tasteless manna. It may do very well for angels, but we have been accustomed to garlic and onions down in Egypt. They smell strong, and there is some taste in them. Give us them.’ And so some of you say, ‘The offer of pardon is of no use to me, for I am not troubled with my sin. The offer of purity has no attraction to me, for I rather like the dirt and wallowing in it. The offer of a heaven of your sort is but a dreary prospect to me. And so I turn away from the hands that offer precious things.’ The man who is blind to the God that beams [glowing] and loving upon him in the face of Jesus Christ—the man who has no stirrings of responsive gratitude for the great outpouring of love upon the Cross—the man who does not care for anything that Jesus Christ can give him, surely, in turning away, commits a real sin.

If you remember the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, when Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and preaches to the Jews in Jerusalem, He preaches in vs. 36 “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” And the response is exactly what Jesus predicted here in John 16. “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said… “What shall we do?”

This is exactly the Holy Spirit conviction that Jesus predicted. The Holy Spirit brings conviction of the sin we all participated in through our own wickedness…the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus, the Lamb of God. The only reasonable response to that conviction is what Peter states to the Jews: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit!”

2) The Conviction of Righteousness

In addition to bringing conviction to the world regarding sin, the Holy Spirit also convinces the world about righteousness. Jesus unpacks this further in vs. 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer;

The resurrection and ascension of Christ validate Jesus as the Righteous One. Why? Because only a perfectly righteous man with no sin can escape the bonds of death. Jesus laid down His life for sinners. He most certainly suffered torture and died in our place. But Jesus rose from the dead because He did not belong among the dead. Jesus had no sin…He was perfectly righteous…the unblemished Lamb of God…and so Jesus establishes the bar for righteousness once and for all. You get what that means, right? It means that we do not get to establish our subjective standard of righteousness and inflict others with it. Our greatest good is not “to be true to ourselves,” as though we are qualified to establish our own code of right living and then be true to it…that is sheer nonsense. Jesus established the standard of right living…He is the standard of righteousness, and there is no other.

Again, in Peter’s Holy Spirit inspired sermon he preaches, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.”
The world will no longer see Jesus in the flesh; but they will see and hear the convicting power and presence of the Holy Spirit. That is exactly what happened on the day of Pentecost, and thousands gave their lives to following Jesus in one day.

3) The Conviction of Judgment
Finally, the Holy Spirit convinces the world about judgment. Jesus states: 11 concerning judgments, because the ruler of this world is judged.

Respected leaders in Jerusalem, confident in their own righteousness (yet sons of the Devil according to Jesus in John 8), had sentenced Jesus to die as a condemned man. They had put themselves in the judgment seat, confident that in killing the Nazarene they were offering services to their god. However, on that dark day when the Lamb of God hung upon the cross, as the earth shook and the sun failed, the Holy Spirit brought conviction to many who confessed, “Surely this was the Son of God!” Not unlike the “deep magic” referred to by Aslan in Narnia, the willing sacrifice of a pure and sinless soul on behalf of the condemned turned the tables.

“Now,” says the Great Lion of Judah, “the ruler of this world is judged.” I will not try to pretend that I understand the implications of what Jesus reveals at this hour to His disciples. But let us stand amazed and be grateful that the Liar, the One cast down from heaven, the Tempter and the Accuser now stands condemned and defeated, though his final ousting awaits the imminent return of the King.

NT scholar Bruce Milne captures this truth well:

The Spirit exposes the guilt of the human heart in respect of judgment because the prince of this world now stands condemned. The Jews submitted Jesus to the process of a legal tribunal and sought to pass judgment on him. The Spirit in testifying to the Gospel shows that the one judged on the cross was Satan, and with him all who are his children and slaves (8:42-47). The devil ‘has no hold’ on Jesus and so was ‘driven out’ by the perfect obedience of Jesus. He now stands condemned, anticipating his final ‘driving out’ at the last judgment.

The Holy Spirit bears witness to the judgment…the judgment of Satan, and the judgment of all those who, like Satan, would condemn Jesus and mock His sacrifice. Let us not be fooled by the philosophers and the secularists who suggest that there is no judgment…you know better…we all do. We are moral souls, and we will be held accountable. Our only hope is the righteousness of Jesus made available through His obedience on a cross…a righteousness given to us as a gift of grace when we repent and place our confidence in Him. His is a righteousness that will not only rescue us from God’s judgment…it will also lead to right living and just ice here on earth.

Which leads me to my final subheading

III. The Verdict

As you have been listening to this message, you may have noticed the Holy Spirit whispering and working in your soul. He has been cross-examining the assumptions, justifications, and presuppositions you brought into our time together. He has been causing you to question your own case, and persuasively presenting the case for Christ as our Lord, our Savior, and our Redeemer. His cross-examination within your heart should bring conviction regarding sin, righteousness, and judgment…that’s what the Holy Spirit does in human hearts. Even so, you
will be left the liberty to act upon that conviction, or not. In His earthly ministry Jesus called many souls to “follow Him,” but He never forced them to take a single step. The choice is yours.

So, I would ask of every soul here: what is your verdict? What say you? Has the Divine Counselor made His case and brought about conviction in your spirit? Have you come to see your sin, His righteousness, and the judgment that awaits us all? Have you glimpsed the loving countenance of the Lamb, the Beautiful One who died in your place? Then come…lay down your burdens, lay down your pride, lay down your arguments. Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you, too, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Will you pray with me?

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1 Sin, righteousness, and judgment are not exclusively Christian concepts by any means, so we know the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding sin is more specific than general sin. In fact, the observation that all communities of moral human beings have always operated on some notion of sin, righteousness, and judgment is the foundation of C.S. Lewis’ moral argument so beautifully articulated in Mere Christianity—an argument that won over former atheist and renown scientist, Dr. Francis Collins. See his testimony in The Language of God.