



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #17

E. Preparing to Preach a Sermon on John 3:14-18

Step 1: Begin with Prayer

Step 2: Choose a Text

► **Step 3: Study the Text and Context**

Step 4: Look for Law and Gospel

Step 5: Find the Main Point

Step 6: Determine the Order of Presentation

Step 7: Apply the Word to Your Audience

Step 8: Choose the Right Words

Step 9: Prepare an Introduction and a Conclusion

In the previous lessons, we have studied the first three steps to take in the preparation of a sermon. The first step is beginning with prayer, but remember that you should continue to pray throughout your preparation. We need always to remember that we are only instruments of the Holy Spirit in preaching God's Word.

The second step is to select your text. We will choose John 3:14-18. Now we will apply the next step, step 3: Studying the Text and Context.

Step 3: Study the Text and Context of John 3:14-18

Since we are studying the text in English, we will begin our study of John 3:14-18 by the reading of the text in a translation that is both accurate and adequate, the New King James Version. We will also compare this text to other English translations that are readily available: the King James Version, the New American Standard Version, the English Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Evangelical Heritage Version.¹ You may have access to other English translations. If you speak another language, you will want to read and compare your text in that language. It is generally helpful to read your text in as many languages as you are familiar with. If you will be preaching in a language other than English, you will want to especially study your text in the language you in which you will be preaching.

This is the text of John 3:14-18 in the New King James Version:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Many Bibles print the text in red, because it is understood that the entire text is something that Jesus

¹ These translations are all available online at www.BibleGateway.com and www.Bible.com (there is also an application for Bible.com, so you can download these translations on to your phone or tablet).

Himself said in a conversation with Nicodemus. Looking at the context we see that Nicodemus is called **“a man of the Pharisees”** (John 3:1) and **“the teacher of Israel”** (John 3:10).

As we read through this text, there are certain things that we need to study further. For example, what is meant by Moses lifting up the serpent, who is the Son of Man, and how was He lifted up? What does it mean to believe in Him? What is the difference between perishing and having eternal life? What is meant by the world that God loves? What is an only-begotten Son? What does it mean to condemn the world and to save the world? What does it mean to be condemned already? Is there any difference between the Son of Man and the Son of God? We need to have a good understanding of all these things, so that we can teach them accurately to our listeners.

Comparing Other English Translations

Keep these questions in mind as you read the text in other translations. We start with the King James Version. Except for using antiquated words, like **“whosoever believeth”**, and a slight difference in word order, the King James Version and the New King James Version are the same.

The Evangelical Heritage Version substitutes the word **“snake”** for **“serpent.”** It also uses the word **“eternal”** rather than the word **“everlasting”**, and so uses the word **“eternal”** twice. We also read: **“Whoever believes in him shall not perish.”**

The New American Standard Version does not use the words **“condemn”** or **“condemned.”** Rather, it says: **“God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world,”** and **“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already.”**

In New International Version we notice that the first sentence ends like this: **“that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”** It omits any reference to perishing. And instead of using the term **“only-begotten”**, it uses the term **“one and only.”** The NIV also ends Jesus’ words at verse 15, so that verses 16-18 are something that the Apostle John wrote, rather than something Jesus said to Nicodemus. In its desire to avoid using male pronouns, the NIV translates the last verse as follows: **“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”**

The English Standard Version uses a different expression in verse 17: **“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”**

A comparison of these translations does not show that there is anything substantially wrong with the New King James Version translation of these verses. Some words that we might need study more in-depth include **“serpent”** and **“only begotten.”** One translation uses **“judge”** rather than **“condemn,”** but all of the others use **“condemn.”**

If you have had the opportunity to study some Greek and are able to read the Greek to some extent, you will, of course, want to look at your text in its original form.

Studying the Context and Background of the Text

After studying the words of the text and how they are connected to each other, it is important to read the entire context of the selected passage. This means reading all of chapter three of the Gospel of John, and perhaps also the first two chapters as well. It is clear, first of all, that the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus took place very early in Jesus’ ministry. He has just gathered His first disciples; He has just performed His first sign (miracle), and He is in Jerusalem and on the temple grounds for the first time since His baptism and temptation. Jesus has had His first clash with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem because He drove the money changers and the buyers and sellers out of the temple court. When they ask for a sign of His authority, Jesus gave them the sign of His own future resurrection: **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”** (John 2:19). By **“this temple”**, Jesus was referring to His own body.

Jesus did many signs in Jerusalem during this time, for we read that **“many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did”** (John 2:23). We are not given the details of any of these signs. This leads to chapter three, where we are introduced to a Pharisee in Jerusalem named Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He was aware of the miracles that Jesus had done in Jerusalem, for he says to Jesus: **“No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him”** (John 3:2). Nicodemus shows great respect for Jesus by calling Him Rabbi and he implies that Jesus must be a Teacher who has come from God.

At the end of Chapter 2 of John’s Gospel we read that Jesus **“knew what was in man.”** This is demonstrated by Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’ polite and kind opening remark. Jesus knew that Nicodemus was not a true believer in God’s promises to Israel, even though he was a Pharisee and a teacher of Israel. He needed spiritual regeneration; he needed a new birth in order to enter into the kingdom of God. After Jesus pointed out the absolute necessity of a spiritual rebirth, that is, a birth from the Spirit, Jesus went on to speak of what He called heavenly things. He said: **“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven”** (John 3:13). It is hard to know how much of this Nicodemus understood. Jesus spoke of the Son of Man in heaven who has come down from heaven, and He is the only One who can ascend to heaven.

Studying Important Concepts

The better you know the Bible from daily reading and meditation, the easier it will be for you to find connections between your text and other texts and parallel passages in the Bible. For example, when the text speaks of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, you might already know what Jesus is referring to, because you have read the account in the book of Numbers. Your Bible may give you a cross-reference the story in Numbers 21, so you can read the account for yourself. In fact, even if you remember the account, you should reread it to make sure you understand the details correctly. The strange cure for those bitten by poisonous snakes was to look up at a bronze serpent that Moses had put up on a pole. Of course, the bronze serpent in itself could not cure anyone. It was God’s Word of promise that attached the cure to the serpent. God said to Moses: **“Everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live...And so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived”** (Numbers 21:8-9).

It is worthwhile to study the man Nicodemus and learn where he is mentioned in the Bible. You will learn that later on he spoke up in defense of Jesus. In fact, he and Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus down from the cross to bury Jesus. With this act, Nicodemus finally openly demonstrated his love for Jesus. Because Nicodemus was a Pharisee, whatever you can learn about Pharisees might also be helpful in understanding what he says and does.

Since our text speaks about God and His Son, and it refers to both the Son of Man and the Son of God, it would be helpful to further study the relationship between God and His Son, as well as to study the two names used for Jesus in this text: Son of Man and Son of God. It is certainly important to have a good understanding of these concepts and these terms, so that we can be sure that what we say is in full agreement with Holy Scripture.

For help in this study we can turn to the lessons dealing with the doctrine of Christ, or Christology in the Online Theological Studies course. In Dogmatics Lesson 6.3 – [Incarnation](#) we find the following, which should help prevent us from going beyond Scripture in what we say:

Since Jesus is God, He is eternal, just as His Father is eternal. Therefore, we must say that Jesus as God was begotten of the Father from eternity. There was no time when there was no Jesus as Son of God. But there was a definite beginning to Jesus as human – as a man. There was no human Jesus until He was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. About nine months later the Son of God was born of the virgin Mary. Thus, He who has always been God became man at a definite point of time in history and is now the God-man, Jesus, the Christ.

He was always God, but He became human. His becoming human is called the incarnation.

All of the facts of the above paragraph are spelled out clearly in Scripture. The incarnation is most clearly taught in the first chapter of John's Gospel. We are introduced to the eternal Son of God in the first verses: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God"** (John 1: 1-2). Then later in the chapter John tells us: **"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"** (John 1:14). The Word's becoming flesh is the incarnation.

The details of Jesus' incarnation are presented in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The first chapter of Luke tells us that God sent His angel Gabriel to tell the virgin girl Mary of Nazareth that she was God's choice to be the mother of the Son of God: **"You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest"** (Luke 1:31-32). Moreover, Gabriel told her that this boy would not have a human father. Instead He would have a unique conception: **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God... For with God nothing will be impossible"** (Luke 1:35,37).

Even though Jesus had no human father, God provided a husband for Mary in the person of Joseph, a carpenter to whom Mary had been promised through a betrothal. But the marriage was not consummated by a sexual union until after Jesus was born. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant even though he had not been with her, he **"was minded to put her away secretly"** (Matthew 1:19). He felt he could not take her as his wife since this child to be born of her was obviously not his. But God revealed to him the truth about this baby's conception and instructed him in a dream: **"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:20-21).

Thus, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary were both present. The actual birth of Jesus is described in very few words: **"So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn"** (Luke 2:6-7). He who had always been God was now also fully human – true God and true man in one person. The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, such as Genesis 3:15, Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9: 6-7, Micah 5:2, and Jeremiah 23:5.

In Dogmatics Lesson 6.4 – The Union of Jesus' Two Natures in One Person we read:

Jesus has a human nature and a divine nature. He is both God and man. But He is not two persons; He does not have two personalities. The person of the Son of God, who is eternal, has now taken on human nature, but He is the same person as before. **"The Word became flesh"** (John 1:14). For this reason, the angel Gabriel told Mary: **"That Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God"** (Luke 1:35). And Mary's cousin Elizabeth called Mary **"the mother of my Lord"** (Luke 1:43). So, it is correct to give Mary the title "mother of God", for He who was in her womb from conception was true God. The angel announced to the Bethlehem shepherds at the birth of Jesus: **"There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Luke 2:11). We do not know how soon Jesus realized that He was the Son of God, but we do know that by the age of twelve Jesus was fully aware of the fact that God was His Father in a very special sense (Luke 2:49).

The apostle John fought against false teachers who denied that the Son of God had assumed

human flesh and blood. That is why he established this truth as a way to separate true teachers from false teachers: **“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God”** (1 John 4:2-3). The apostle Paul’s words concerning Jesus have been true from the moment of His conception: **“In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”** (Colossians 2:9).

The incarnation of the Son of God brought about a union of Jesus’ divine nature and Jesus’ human nature in one Person. The human nature retains all the characteristics of humanity, and the divine nature retains all the characteristics of deity. Yet there is only one Person, one personality, the God-man Jesus, the Christ. From the moment of His conception in Mary’s womb, the human and divine natures are united in such a way that they cannot ever be divided. When Jesus died, the Son of God died. The divine nature shared in the death of Jesus, even though God as God cannot die. This is all-important to us, because **“We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son”** (Romans 5:10), that is, the death of the Son of God. Many who knew Jesus on earth did not recognize Him as the Son of God, but His disciples knew who He was. Peter confessed for them all: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16).

The beginning of the personal union between human and divine natures can be described in different ways. We can say that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb. We can say the eternal Son of God became flesh. The deity assumed humanity. Before this union the Son of God was the eternal Word *without flesh*. After the incarnation the Son of God was and is the eternal Word *in flesh*, permanently. **“The Word became flesh”** (John 1:14). In the Old Testament, the Son of God sometimes appeared in human form, for example, when He visited Abraham. This was not incarnation, however. It was not the beginning of a permanent union between divine and human natures. The Angel (or Messenger) of God in Old Testament was still “the Word without Flesh”; His taking on of an earthly body was only temporary.

Man did not become God, but God became man. This is one of the greatest miracles of all. It is far beyond our understanding or ability to explain. **“Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh”** (1 Timothy 3:16). In an attempt to explain this mystery, some of the early church fathers said it was like iron glowing with fire, or like the union of body and soul in a human being.

Another concept in John 3:16-18 that needs special study is what is meant by God’s love for the world. This passage seems to teach that God loves everyone, and yet we know from this same passage that some are saved, but others perish. How does God speak of these things in the Bible? In order to make sure that what we say agrees with God’s Word, it is important to review what the Bible says about God’s love for the world.

To help us in this study, we look at Dogmatics Lesson 6.7.2.6, which talks about universal atonement and universal justification. Here is an excerpt:

Christ and His apostles do not want anyone to feel left out of the salvation Christ won for them by His work as our High Priest, so the fact that everyone is included is stressed in many places in the Bible. Jesus said: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (John 3:16). And Jesus said: **“The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”** (Luke 19:10). Surely all of us are lost sinners. Paul tells us: **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). **“As through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life”** (Romans 5:18). **“If One died for all, then all died”** (2 Corinthians 5:14). **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”** (1 Timothy 1:15). **“The Man Christ**

Jesus ... gave Himself a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2: 5-6).

When the word “many” is used instead of “all,” it does not mean “many, but not all,” rather it is a contrast between “many” and “few.” Jesus said, for example: **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:28). In instituting the Lord’s Supper, Jesus said: **“This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”** (Matthew 26:28). **“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous”** (Romans 5:19). It is especially clear in this last passage that “many” means “all”, because *all* were made sinners by Adam’s disobedience and *all* were justified, as previous verse clearly states.

What about those who lived and died before Christ died and rose again? Did Christ’s work apply also to them? Yes! Jesus’ work certainly included Abraham, for He said to the Jews: **“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”** (John 8:56). The apostle Peter testified at the Jerusalem convention: **“Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they”** (Acts 15:10-11). The apostle Paul pointed out that God had forgiven the Old Testament sinners because of Jesus’ sacrifice: **“God set forth [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed”** (Romans 3:24-25). The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that Old Testament sinners are included in Jesus’ work: **“He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance”** (Hebrews 9:15). The transgressions under the first covenant were redeemed by Jesus’ death and resurrection, and so the Old Testament believers received the promise of the eternal inheritance because of Jesus sacrifice.

When God’s Word tells us that Christ died for all, it means every individual sinner: **“Jesus ... was made a little lower than the angels ... that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone”** (Hebrews 2:9). This even includes the many who, because of their unbelief, will not benefit from what Christ has done for them. Peter writes: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring destructive heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them”** (2 Peter 2:1). Even though these false teachers denied Jesus, they were still bought by Jesus’ blood.

Christ and His apostles also make it clear that since Jesus, as our High Priest, has atoned for all sinners in the world, there is no need to add to His priestly work. Jesus said: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”** (John 14:6). Peter testified: **“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”** (Acts 4:12). The letter to the Hebrews repeats over and over again that Jesus had to bring His sacrifice only once, and that His one single sacrifice gained remission of sins for all. **“Where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin”** (Hebrews 10:18). No other sacrifice is needed. We need no other Savior. Christ’s work of atoning for the sin of the world as our High Priest is complete and needs no supplement.

On the basis of the Bible passages we have quoted above, it is certainly proper for us to speak of universal atonement and universal justification. Many passages say that Jesus has atoned for the sins of the world and that He has justified all. But there are many false teachers in Christendom who deny that Jesus atoned for all sinners. The followers of John Calvin, Calvinists, for example, believe in and teach what they call a *limited atonement*. They claim that Jesus did not atone for all sinners, but only for those who were chosen by God from eternity to come to saving faith in Christ. In other words, they claim that Jesus sacrificed Himself only for those who remain believers in Christ to their dying day. Calvinists cannot believe that Jesus died for sinners

who reject Him in unbelief. But the Bible is clear that Jesus died for all persons, including even those who reject Him. The message these false teachers proclaim is no longer the Good News of the Gospel. Instead of proclaiming forgiveness of sins to all because of Christ's work of atoning for all, they have to wrongly say: "Jesus died for you if you believe in Him. Jesus died for some of you, but not for all of you. There are some of you whom God did not want to save; Jesus did not die for you." This kind of message is not the true Gospel of Jesus Christ! God's word is clear: Jesus took away the sins of the whole world and, by His obedience, justified all.

There are also many false teachers, even among Lutherans, who accept universal atonement but do not accept universal justification. But the Bible clearly teaches universal justification in such passages as Romans 3:23-24, Romans 5:18-19, and 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. In all of these passages the Bible clearly says that all are justified, or declared righteous, on the basis of Christ's redemption of the world. It is true, however, that many reject the forgiveness and justification they have from Jesus, and thus lose these gifts. Justification and forgiveness can be received only by faith.

It is important that we do not preach God's message of forgiveness as though there were conditions that we have to fulfill before it becomes true. For example, we should not say to someone: "If you do this or that good thing, then you will be forgiven." We should not even say to someone: "If you believe, you will be forgiven." Rather our message is this: "Because Jesus has died for all, He has died for you, and therefore there is forgiveness for you. You have been declared righteous and forgiven before God, because Christ's sacrifice has paid for all your sins." One of our Lutheran teachers has said it this way: "Sinners are not justified now *if* they believe, but if they have true faith, they believe that they *have been justified* in Christ (objective justification). There is no gospel (good news!) for the sinner but this" (John Schaller: *Biblical Christology*, p. 181). So, the Gospel needs to be proclaimed as a true blessing, without *any* conditions – without any ifs, ands, or buts, as we say. It is *unconditioned* good news. Not even faith is a condition or term we need to meet; faith is only the receiving organ, that is, the way by which we receive the benefit. In Christ we all have universal atonement and universal justification!

You may not always have the time to study all the topics that are related to your text. But whenever you study a doctrine that is found in your text, you will remember something of what you have learned before. The next time you have a text that refers to the same topic, you will have a more complete understanding of the topic. This is one of the ways we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your continuing study of God's Word will make you better prepared to preach this Word to others.

Questions

1. Which versions or translations of the Bible will you read in preparation to preach a sermon on John 3:14-18?
2. Which version or translation will you use in preaching your sermon?
3. Which words or expressions did you not understand when you first read John 3:14-18?
4. What is meant by the context of John 3:14-18?
5. What have you been able to learn about Nicodemus?
6. Why is it important to study the various doctrines that are referred to in your text?
7. Why is it important to be clear on what the Bible teaches us about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son?
8. What dangers must we avoid in speaking about God's love for the world?