



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

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #19

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 preparing to preach a sermon on a specific text you should look for the law and Gospel elements in the text. John 3:14-18 is primarily a Gospel text, since it talks mainly about God's love for the world and the sending of His Son into the world as a Savior. But there are law elements in the text as well. Always remember that the Gospel is intended for troubled sinners. Since only the sick need a physician, it is part of your task to convince your audience that they are sick and need a physician. The Holy Spirit uses the law for that purpose.

There is one part of John 3:14-18 that is definitely law: the last part of verse 18: **"He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."** Any verse that speaks of condemnation is certainly law.

But the text refers to law elements in other places as well. The historical background of verse 14 refers to an Old Testament incident that involves human sin and God's judgment. We read in Numbers 21:4-7: **"Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.' So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."**

What does God's law have to say about such behavior? The First Commandment directs us to put our trust in the Lord and to thank Him for all His blessings. But the children of Israel were discouraged because of their lack of food and water. Moreover, the people of Israel called the good food – the manna that God was giving them regularly – **"worthless"** and they **"loathed"** this bread. They were despising the blessings that God was providing for them. God had been faithful in the past to provide for all their needs for food and drink. They received water from rock more than once. They had eaten quail. Their supply of manna from the Lord was constant, and the manna was good food, not worthless. They should not have loathed it or been unhappy with what God provided them.

Moreover, the text says specifically that **"the people spoke against God and against Moses."** Their complaining was not only in their thoughts but in their words as well. The first four commandments condemn both their thoughts and words. No one should ever complain against God's way of handling

our human situation. We should not talk back to God, or reject those whom He has placed over us, unless they bring us that which is false or ungodly.

Another element of law is suggested by the word **“perish”** in John 3:15-16. The word **“perish”** is used in contrast to **“eternal life”** and being **“saved.”** Thus, the kind of perishing these verses are talking about is the kind of perishing that is eternal, without any future possibility of life or salvation. Why did the Israelites die in the wilderness? They died because of their complaining and disobedience. Because of these sins, God sent them the judgment of the poisonous snakes.

In a similar way, all of us are infected with the poison of sin, which leads to God’s judgment and eternal perishing. Without God’s intervention through the bronze serpent in the wilderness, all the Israelites would have died. Without God’s intervention through the lifting up of God’s Son on the cross, we would all perish eternally. Temporal death is unnatural; it is not something that God created us for. The same thing is even more true of eternal death. The Bible tells us that all human beings **“through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”** (Hebrews 2:15). The mere mention of death is enough to make us all anxious to a degree, until we learn of the remedy that God has provided through His Son, Jesus Christ.

The law element in this text is obvious in John 3:18, where Jesus condemns unbelief in simple words. He is not talking about unbelief in general, but unbelief with respect to the Son God sent to save the world. **“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.”** Unbelief in Jesus is a sin against the very First Commandment, which requires that we fear, and love, and trust in God above all things. We are not trusting in God when we reject the very One God sent into the world to be our Savior. We can think of the whole world as being under the wrath of God because of its sin. But God has provided an umbrella large enough and strong enough to protect all persons from this wrath of God. Very many, however, prefer to face God’s wrath on their own without finding refuge under Christ’s umbrella. John 3:36 teaches the same thing, where we read: **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”**

But in spite of these law elements in John 3:14-18, the Gospel – the Good News – of Jesus clearly predominates in this text, and therefore the Gospel should also predominate in our preaching of this text. Consider first the good news that God gave to the sinning Israelites through Moses when He ordered Moses to make the bronze serpent and put it on a pole. This remedy for the poison of the snakes was very easy to take. All they had to do was to look up at the serpent on a pole, and their sickness would be healed. That was certainly good news for the penitent Israelites.

But the good news of John 3:15-18 was not intended only for a small nation like the Israelites. This is good news for the **“world.”** The way God loved the world was to give the world His Son, who is **“the Son of Man”** (John 3:13-14) and also **“Son of God”** (John 3:18). As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent at God’s command, so God Himself lifted up the Son of Man on the cross. As the bronze serpent reminded the people of the cause of their problem, the fiery serpents, so the Son of God hanging on the cross would be a picture of sin. As it is written, God made Jesus **“to be sin for us”** (2 Corinthians 5:21) on the cross.

God’s remedy for human sin extends to all mankind. **“The world”** was the object of God’s love, so that **“whoever believes in Him should not perish.”** God sent His Son into the world **“that the world through Him might be saved.”** As we learn from other passages in Scripture, God poured out on His Son the full punishment for all human sin; that is what was in the cup that Jesus drank on that day. Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath and drained it dry, so that no more punishment remains. Therefore, Jesus is rightly called **“the Savior of the world”** (John 4:42), and John the Baptist correctly testified of Him: **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29).

In this way, and in this way only, salvation and everlasting life have been won by Jesus for every individual sinner. **“Whoever believes in Him”** shall not perish, but have everlasting life. But the sinner needs to have a connection with Jesus in order to have the benefit of what Jesus accomplished for all sinners. The connection is called believing in Him, or having faith in Him, or trusting in Him. Notice it is not just belief or trust or faith in general, but believing **“in Him,”** trusting **“in Him,”** having faith **“in Him.”**

Not believing in Jesus is a rejection of God’s love and God’s loving plan of salvation. There is no alternate plan. Either Jesus is our Savior from sin, or we have no savior from sin. Without faith in Jesus, we will perish. Without faith in Jesus, the only thing we have is condemnation. Unbelievers have condemnation already now because they are separated from the blessings of Jesus, and hereafter they will have eternal condemnation, if they do not believe in Jesus now or ever in the future.

John 3:16 has rightly been called the Gospel in a nutshell, because in simple words it presents Jesus as the only Savior for the whole world.

Questions

1. Why do Christian preachers need to include elements of law in their preaching?
2. Which elements of law can be found in John 3:14-18?
3. Why will preaching only the law not produce good results?
4. Why must we call John 3:14-18 a text that stresses the Gospel?
5. Why should the Gospel predominate every Christian sermon?
6. What is the Gospel? (Give a summary of the message of the Gospel.)
7. What do you consider the main point in John 3:14-14?

Study Luke 10:38-42 and try to pick out what you think is the main point of this passage.