WHY PEOPLE REJECT CHRIST

John 3:19-21

By

Steven J. Cole

July 7, 2013

© Steven J. Cole, 2013

To access previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to Sermons tab: www.fcfonline.org

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation
Why People Reject Christ
John 3:19-21

Picture a guy floating downstream on a raft on a hot summer day. He's having the time of his life, enjoying the ride as the cool water gently splashes on him. You’re on the shore and you know that there’s a deadly waterfall not far downstream. This guy is floating blissfully and ignorantly toward certain destruction! So you yell to warn him. You throw him a rope. But he rejects it and keeps floating toward certain death. Why won’t he grab the life preserver? Because he loves what he’s doing and he doesn’t want to believe your warning.

Why do people reject God’s wonderful offer of salvation through Jesus Christ? You would think that everyone would eagerly grab the life preserver that God has thrown out through the gospel (John 3:16): “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Why would anyone reject such a wonderful offer? Why would anyone want to keep heading for eternal destruction? In our text, John shows us:

People reject Christ because they love their sin and they hate having it exposed by God’s light.

People don’t want God interfering with what they consider “a good time,” and they don’t believe the warnings of Scripture that they are under God’s judgment now and will face it eternally when they die. People think that they’re basically good and that God will overlook their faults and give them credit for their good deeds on judgment day. So they don’t repent of their sin and believe in Jesus Christ to save them from God’s judgment. The Greek philosopher, Plato, observed (source unknown), “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” John makes four points here:

1. **The light came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, and His presence condemned those in darkness.**
John 3:19a: “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world ....” John has already introduced Jesus as the Light (1:4-5): “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” Later (8:12; also, 9:5; 12:46), Jesus states, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

In the Bible, light is used symbolically in two main ways: First, it refers to God’s absolute holiness and, by extension, to the holiness of His people; whereas darkness symbolizes Satan’s domain and sin (Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18). Paul says (1 Tim. 6:16) that God “dwells in unapproachable light.” In 1 John 1:5, the apostle declares, “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” In this vein, Paul exhorts us (Eph. 5:7-10):

Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Second, light refers to the spiritual illumination or understanding that we get when we are born again, whereas darkness refers to our natural spiritual blindness before we are saved (2 Cor. 4:3-4, 6):

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.... For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

In that sense, God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Proverbs 6:23 says, “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life .....” God’s Word gives spiritual light so that we understand God’s truth and how He wants us to live.

God’s light is embodied in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh. John has told us (1:9), “There was
the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man." When Jesus came into the world, His very presence exposed the world to who God is as holy and to the fact that we are not holy. D. A. Carson explains John 1:9 (The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans/ Apollos], p. 124):

It shines on every man, and divides the race: those who hate the light respond as the world does (1:10): they flee lest their deeds should be exposed by this light (3:19-21). But some receive this revelation (1:12-13), and thereby testify that their deeds have been done through God (3:21). In John’s Gospel it is repeatedly the case that the light shines on all, and forces a distinction (e.g. 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:39-41).

Leon Morris (The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans], p. 233, italics his) explains John 3:19,

The word translated “judgment” here denotes the process of judging, not the sentence of condemnation…. It is not God’s sentence with which [John] is concerned here. He is telling us rather how the process works. Men choose the darkness and their condemnation lies in that very fact…. They refuse to be shaken out of their comfortable sinfulness.

As we saw in 3:17-18, even though Jesus did not come for the purpose of judgment, because of who He is, His very presence brought judgment and divided people. Have you ever been in the presence of a very godly man, so that his very presence made you uncomfortable? R. C. Sproul (The Holiness of God [Tyndale], pp. 91-92) tells about a leading professional golfer years ago who was invited to play in a foursome with Gerald Ford, Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. He had played with Nicklaus before, but he was in awe of playing with President Ford and Billy Graham.

After the round was finished, one of the other pros came up and asked, “Hey, what was it like playing with the President and with Billy Graham?” The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing, and said in a disgusting manner, “I don’t need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat.” With that he turned and stormed off, heading for the practice tee.

His friend followed the angry pro and watched him take out his driver and beat ball after ball in fury. The friend said nothing,
but just sat on a bench and watched. After a few minutes, the pro had calmed down. His friend said quietly, “Was Billy a little rough on you out there?” The pro heaved an embarrassed sigh and said, “No, he didn’t even mention religion. I just had a bad round.”

Billy Graham’s presence made that golf pro feel condemned, even when Billy didn’t say a word about God! How much more would we all have felt condemned to be in the presence of Jesus Christ! Do you remember one of Peter’s early encounters with Jesus, when Jesus caused the miraculous catch of fish? Peter fell down at Jesus’ feet and said (Luke 5:8), “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

Have you had that experience with Jesus Christ? Have you seen who Jesus is and instantly recognized, “He is holy and I am not holy! I am under God’s judgment because Jesus is Light and I am darkness!” When you’ve that kind of encounter with Jesus, you can go one of two ways. First, John presents the negative reaction:

2. **People love darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil.**

John 1:19b: “... men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.” This phrase contains several significant truths about sin. First, sin is far deeper than outward deeds; sin is a matter of our affections or desires. “Men loved darkness.” The past tense (Greek aorist) could be translated, “Men set their love on darkness” (Morris, p. 233). Loved indicates that this was not a cool, rational decision: “Having weighed all the factors involved, I think the best decision is to love darkness rather than light.” No, it was in large part an emotional choice that stems from desires that dwell in our hearts due to the fall. We love darkness rather than light.

This leads to a second significant truth about sin: Our sin problem is far deeper than we ever imagined. The Bible does not teach that we are basically good people who need to overcome a few flaws in our character. We’re not merely in need of more education or learning some anger management skills so that we can develop better relational skills. We don’t need to go through therapy to explore our pasts and figure out why our parents treated us as they did so that we can now understand why we are the way we are. All of these approaches to sin are too superficial from a biblical standpoint.
The Bible shows that our root problem is that we love our sin rather than God’s holiness. It’s a matter of the heart, and the only remedy that goes deep enough is the new birth, which gives us new hearts that hunger and thirst after righteousness.

This phrase also shows us a third truth about sin: The reason that people reject Christ is not primarily intellectual, but moral. Unbelievers do not love darkness rather than light because they have thought it through carefully and concluded that darkness makes more sense. No, unbelievers love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. The light exposes their evil deeds and convicts them of their true moral guilt before the holy God. But, frankly, they like sinning!

Aldous Huxley, the famous atheist of the last century, once admitted that his rejection of Christianity stemmed from his desire to sin. He wrote (Ends and Means [Garland Publishers], pp. 270, 273, cited in James Boice, Genesis [Zondervan], 1:236):

I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had not; and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning for this world is not concerned exclusively with the problem of pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to…. For myself … the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political.

This means that when you’re sharing the gospel, don’t be intimidated by a Ph.D. who argues in favor of evolution or who cites arguments from the latest popular atheist. Don’t panic if someone says, “I don’t believe in the Bible because of its contradictions.” You can give philosophic arguments for the existence of God or scientific arguments against evolution all day long, but even if you were to convince the unbeliever intellectually, you have not dealt with his main problem. His main problem is that he loves his sin and he stands guilty before the holy Judge of the universe.

I’m not saying that we should not have good answers to these intellectual questions. But I am saying that they are usually not the real issue. You can ask the person raising the objection, “Are you saying that if I can give reasonable answers to these questions, you
will repent of your sins and trust in Christ as your Savior and Lord?” Invariably, the answer will be, “Well, I have other objections, too.” The objections are smoke screens to hide the fact that unbelievers love their sin.

This phrase shows us a fourth truth about sin: Sin must be determined by God’s absolute standards of holiness, not by men’s relative standards of goodness. When John says that men’s “deeds are evil,” we may recoil and think, “Terrorists and drug dealers and pedophiles and pimps are evil. But most people are not evil. Just look at all the good people in this world!”

The Bible acknowledges that there are unbelievers who are relatively good people. Because of God’s common grace, all people are not as evil as they could be. The human race would have self-destructed millennia ago if everyone acted as badly as they could. God restrains outward evil through civil government, through social disapproval, and through the fear of shame and the desire to look good to others. But God looks on the heart. Hebrews 4:13 reminds us, “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” When God looks at our hearts, even the best of people, humanly speaking, are filled with pride, selfishness, greed, lust, and other sins that may never come into public view.

But the situation of loving darkness rather than light is far worse than just loving sin:

3. **Those who practice evil hate Jesus, who is light, and do not come to Him for fear that their deeds will be exposed.**

John 3:20: “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” Unbelievers do not just love their sin; they also hate Jesus! They hate the One who out of love offered Himself on the cross so that every sinner might not perish but have eternal life simply by believing in Him! They hate Him because He exposes their evil deeds.

A teacher assigned his fourth-grade students to write a topic sentence for the following phrases: “Sam always works quietly. Sam is polite to the teacher. Sam always does his homework.” The student’s topic sentence? “I hate Sam.” (Reader’s Digest [November, 2007], p. 59)
We need to understand several things about this verse. First, John does not mean that all sinners do their evil deeds in secret. Many do, of course. Many otherwise respectable men would never frequent a strip club in their own city, for fear of being seen. But if they’re traveling far from home, where they think they’re safe, they might yield to that sin. But in our day, when people call good evil and evil good (Isa. 5:20), it’s cool to flaunt your sin. Movie stars and other celebrities go on television to tell about their immoral behavior. We have “gay pride” celebrations to boast in what God condemns as evil. John is merely pointing out that such sinners do not come to the Light (Jesus) because they know that He would condemn their behavior as evil.

Second, John does not say that those who practice evil are neutral toward Jesus; rather, they hate Him. Many unbelievers would object. They would say that they don’t have anything against Jesus; they’re indifferent towards Him. They think that Jesus was a good man. Some may think that He was a prophet. They may say that He was a good moral teacher. They might even feel bad that He got crucified for His teachings and beliefs. They recognize that that was a miscarriage of justice. But they would protest if you said that they hate Jesus. They’re just indifferent. But John says that they hate Jesus. Jesus Himself told His then unbelieving brothers (John 7:7), “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil.”

Third, John gives the reason why unbelievers hate Jesus: they fear that He will expose their evil deeds. It’s like the golfer playing with Billy Graham: just being around a guy like that makes you nervous because you’re always afraid that you’ll slip and utter a swear word or say or do something that will expose your evil heart.

When I was a new pastor, Marla and I went to look at a house that was for sale. The owner was an old codger who was smoking a cigarette as he talked with us about his house. He got around to asking me what I did for a living and I told him that I was the pastor of the church nearby. He got all agitated, threw down his cigarette, stomped on it and rubbed it out with his foot, and exclaimed, “Look at me! Look at me! Smoking in front of a reverend!” He must have thought that his smoking was a sin. But it never occurred to him that he always smoked in front of the living God!
The word translated “exposed” means to be convicted in a court of law. It was used of an attorney proving his case. Jesus uses it in John 16:8 when He says that the Holy Spirit “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” Guilty criminals hate judges who convict them of their crimes, even though it’s not the judges’ fault. Guilty sinners hate Jesus because He convicts them of their sins.

But, because of God’s grace, not all reject Christ:

4. **True believers practice the truth and come to the Light, so that their deeds are shown to have God as their source.**

John 3:21: “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” John does not mean that some have a natural bent toward practicing the truth or that doing so brings salvation. He has just made it plain that we all need the new birth and that salvation comes through believing in Jesus Christ (3:1-16).

Rather, John is describing two types of people in the world: Those that have not believed in Christ avoid the light and hate it, because it exposes their sinful deeds. Those that have believed in Christ gladly come to Him and give Him all credit for their good deeds, because they know that those good deeds came from God, who caused them to be born again (1 Pet. 1:3; James 1:18).

“Practicing the truth” is a Semitic expression which means to act faithfully or honorably (Carson, p. 207). But it also shows us that the truth is to be lived, not just spoken (1 John 1:6). “Truth” is an important concept for John He uses the word 25 times in his gospel and 20 more times in his epistles. Truth is embodied in Jesus Himself, who said (14:6), “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” Jesus told Pilate (18:37), “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” This has two implications:

First, there is such a thing as absolute truth in the spiritual and moral realms and you can spot believers by their obedience to that truth. Contrary to the postmodern mindset, truth is not relative to the culture or situation. All truth is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21) and He declared that God’s Word is truth (John 17:17). This means that believers are commit-
ted to the truth. We seek to understand the truth more deeply. We hold to the truth of God’s Word even when our culture goes against it.

Second, believers willingly, gladly, and repeatedly come to the light of God’s Word in order to grow in holiness and to give God glory for His work in their hearts. True believers read God’s Word over and over, allowing it to shine into the dark corners of their lives and expose the sinful thoughts and intentions of their hearts (Heb. 4:12). False believers avoid the Word and they find churches that don’t preach the Word to expose sin. False believers try to keep up a good front to impress others, but they don’t live openly in the light of God’s presence on the heart level.

Conclusion

J. C. Ryle (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels [Baker], 3:164) points out that eventually sinners will get what they desired while on earth: they loved darkness; they will be cast into outer darkness. They hated the light; they will be shut out from the light eternally. God will be perfectly just in condemning those who rejected Christ. They saw the Light, but hated it and turned away from it because they loved their sin.

John Piper summarizes our text (DesiringGod.org, “This is the Judgment: Light has come into the World”): “The coming of Jesus into the world clarifies that unbelief is our fault, and belief is God’s gift. Which means that if we do not come to Christ, but rather perish eternally, we magnify God’s justice. And if we do come to Christ and gain eternal life, we magnify God’s grace.”

I pray that we all will believe in Jesus and rejoice in His light, so that we magnify God’s grace!
Application Questions

1. Why is it crucial to judge not just outward sins, but also to judge our sins on the thought (or heart) level (Matt. 5:27-30)?

2. How can you determine whether a person’s intellectual objections are genuine or just a smokescreen?

3. How can we determine whether commands in the Bible (e.g. women’s roles) were limited to that culture or whether they are absolute for every time and place?

4. How open should we be in sharing our sinful thoughts with others? Does walking in the light require total disclosure?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2013, All Rights Reserved.