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John 3:16–21, ESV.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Heaven vs. the Kingdom of God.

Today’s message has to do with a question that came up during a recent Bible Study, the first in our series on developing true faith. The question that was asked was this: Does the Bible truly say that those who do not become Christians are all going to Hell? All of us, perhaps, have been taught that the Bible makes this perfectly clear. So what if a Buddhist or a Hindu was never exposed to our God. So what if they have lived lives of humility, modesty, and kindness. So what if they have treated all those around them with love and respect. They aren’t followers of Jesus Christ, and so they are condemned to Hell. It would take a very long sermon to go through the entire New Testament, debating every relevant passage. Instead,

today, I'll look at a couple of key passages, ones that are typically used to back up this assertion. Let's start with our quote for today. A majority of the references that are used to back up the assertion of damnation for non-believers comes from this Gospel, the one written by someone named John. For context, we have just read the famous story about Nicodemus, the Jewish official and member of the Sanhedrin, who seems to understand that Jesus must be the Messiah but has trouble comprehending the notion professed by Jesus that we all need to somehow be born again. He wants to know if he is supposed to crawl back inside his mother. Then we come to our passage. Here it is, a bit compressed; Jesus is speaking: *"¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."* It seems clear: *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of*

the only Son of God. But once again, as we have seen over and over, a problem arises, having to do with translation. The traditional way of translating this is incorrect. The word that is translated the first time as “condemned” is the biblical Greek word *krinetai*. It does not mean condemned. It means “judged”. The second time it appears, as “already condemned” is the same word in a different form: *kekritai*. It does not mean “already condemned”. It means “has been judged”. The passage should be translated this way: *Whoever believes in him is not judged, but whoever does not believe has been judged, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.* There is a huge difference between being judged and being condemned. Let’s continue with what comes next: ¹⁹*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.* “Works” means actions or deeds; the biblical Greek word is “*erga*”, and “deeds” is a better translation. So together these lines say that if we believe in Jesus, we are not judged, but if we do not believe, we have already been judged, and the judgment is this: they loved the darkness, and the evidence of this is that what they did with their lives was evil. This is a classic example of many generations of people being programmed by a biblical mistranslation.

Let’s look at a very famous passage from the Gospel of John. It is verse 6 of Chapter 14. Jesus is talking to Thomas, one of the Apostles: ⁶*Jesus said to him, “I*

am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. What does Jesus mean when he says, “except through me”? We have decided, over time, that it means that if you do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah, you are condemned. It might mean that we cannot be with God for eternity unless we are indeed living in the way Jesus teaches. In any regard, this doesn’t say that if you don’t follow Jesus’ teachings, you are on your way to Hell the instant you die.

I believe that the strong focus many of us have on salvation by faith instead of salvation by acts is exaggerated. Paul himself focused heavily in his letters on faith alone not being enough to prove one’s salvation: we must act on our faith, and our acts are indicative of what is truly in our hearts. Consider this compressed version of the Final Judgement passage from near the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Again, Jesus is speaking: ³¹ *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you*

clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'
³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?'* ³⁸ *And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?'* ³⁹ *And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'* ⁴⁰ *And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'* ⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'* ⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,* ⁴³ *I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'* ⁴⁶ *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

This makes it very clear that what is in our hearts is what matters, and we always act from the depth of our hearts. We often say that we are saved by our faith, and that our actions, while they alone do not save us, are extremely indicative of what is inside us. The Bible is even clearer on this point. When God goes to judge our faith, God looks into our minds - and God sees what's there. What resides inside of us, that which controls how we interface with other people and with all that God has created - that is what God sees. Faith is an ongoing, continuous thing. You aren't saved the day you believe and then you can cruise for the rest of your

life. We must continue to have a relationship with God. Here are two things to notice about the Bible: 1) When biblical authors wrote about evil people, they compared the faithful, the ones who are saved, to the brutal colonizers around them, the Greeks, Romans, Assyrians, Babylonians, the many peoples who conquered them and treated humans cruelly. The biblical authors were not thinking about good people of other faiths, people who had faiths most of them were not even aware of, like Hindus or Buddhists. 2) In the eyes of God, how we live is the primary metric of just who and what we are. My opinion is this: a godly Hindu is far more of a faithful person than a hypocritical, evil, so-called Christian.

I'd like to shift focus and look at what Jesus is quoted as saying about Heaven. He did acknowledge that there is a Heaven after death. Here is something from Chapter 23 of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is hanging on his cross: ³⁹*One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!"* ⁴⁰*But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die?"* ⁴¹*We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong."* ⁴²*Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."* ⁴³*And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."* Jesus is confronted by one criminal on a cross who is sarcastic and insulting with Jesus. Then he is comforted

by another criminal hanging on a cross. That man shows remorse for his crimes. He simply asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus passes into his Kingdom. That is enough for Jesus to declare that this second criminal will be in Heaven.

Notice that the confessing criminal refers to Jesus' "Kingdom". During his short human life, Jesus did not focus on the issue of how we earn our way to Heaven. He didn't spend his ministry mostly preaching that we need to believe so that when we die, we can go to Heaven. It's not that he denied this: he certainly affirmed some sort of beautiful afterlife. But his main focus was how we live and how we treat other humans. He preached not about Heaven, but about – as the confessing criminal on the cross said – his Kingdom. The Kingdom of God was Jesus' concern. That good man who was dying on the cross next to Jesus knew that Jesus was going to pass away from this life and then return to his Kingdom. There is a subtle mistranslation in this passage. The original Greek does not say "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." What he says is "Jesus, remember me when you come into *the* Kingdom." It's not Jesus' kingdom, specifically. It's the Kingdom of God. Jesus' mission is to bring us into the Kingdom of God, not just to make sure we go to the good place when we die.

Here is something from the Gospel of Mark, from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is the first Chapter of Mark and we have just been introduced to John

the Baptist, who is preparing the way for Jesus: ⁹ *One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.* ¹⁰ *As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove.* ¹¹ *And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”* ¹² *The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness,* ¹³ *where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.* ¹⁴ *Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News.* ¹⁵ *“The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”* First, there is a translation problem here, as well. In the Greek, verse 10 refers to “heavens”, not Heaven; this is properly translated. However, verse 11 is translated as referring to heaven, but in the Greek, it also refers to “heavens”. It should read: “And a voice from the heavens said, “You are my dearly loved Son.” This is passage is not about Heaven, about some beautiful place where God lives. Verse 15 quotes Jesus, after John has been arrested, as warning that we need to change our ways because “the Kingdom of God is near.” “The heavens” means from outside the Earth somewhere, from a place that only God can inhabit, not specifically Heaven. So, right at the beginning of the first of the four Gospels to be written, the Gospel of Mark, we see that Jesus is not focused on Heaven and

Hell. This is a modern, western obsession. Jesus was concerned about us hearing the Good News and then walking in the Kingdom of God, now - and for eternity.

Here is something from the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, where his disciples are struggling with just who Jesus is, and what Jesus is doing here on Earth. Jesus is speaking to his Apostles: *“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me.”*² *There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?*³ *When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*⁴ *And you know the way to where I am going.”*⁵ *“No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?”*⁶ *Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.* Jesus came here to tell us that if we follow him, we will find the truest path to God. He wanted us to know that the Kingdom of God is for all of us, no matter who we are. There is room for everyone.

We must focus on finding our way into the Kingdom, not on judging whether others will be in Heaven when they pass from this life. Please pray briefly with me.

God, put your hand on our shoulders. Guide us into your Kingdom. Keep us there. Help us always live in the light, treat all people the way Jesus treated them, and leave the final judging to you. Amen.