

December 24, 2023

“Exchanging Our Condemnation for Love”
Luke 1:67-80

FCF: Our struggles with condemnation

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus has come to remove our condemnation.
(magnet) And He longs for us to know His love.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

As I was driving home from last week’s worship service, I casually turned on the radio only to be regaled by Bruce Springsteen’s 1975 “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.” It’s a great rendition. So I’m singing along and it hits me. I don’t watch out. I do cry. I do pout. If there is someone keeping score who sees me when I’m sleeping and knows when I’m awake, I’m sunk. I don’t know what you all do with the Elf on the Shelf. That’s even worse. To say nothing of Krampus, the goat man who takes this all to a whole other level and hauls you off to his cave.

Where do these ideas come from? Why do we keep coming up with such fanciful ways of being kept in line? We have a deep rooted sense of condemnation. And it just keeps coming out. All of which is another of these gifts we have been given that needs to be exchanged. This is our Advent series - faith for our fear, hope for our despair, and love for our condemnation.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Luke 1:67-80](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Condemnation is not isolated to Christmas. We see it throughout the year. With the war in Israel, there is condemnation both for casualties and atrocities. In the presidential campaign, candidates of both parties are blaming the other for our nation’s ills. With cancel culture, folks on both the left and the right want to shut the other up. Then it comes home again when holiday invitations are retracted (or perhaps never extended) because “you are no longer welcome here.”

The reality of Christmas is the sole hope we have to counter the burden of condemnation. Which brings us to our text and Zechariah. Here’s the background. Israel was waiting for the promised messiah. But it had been 400 years since the prophets had spoken. Then one day, as the old priest Zechariah was attending to his duties in the temple, an angel appeared and told him both of a son to be born to him and God’s purposes in it. Zechariah doubted, was disciplined, and had nine long months of speechlessness to think it over. For Elizabeth conceived! Their son was born. Their friends and family gathered. And Zechariah, acting now on faith, heeded the angel’s command, and wrote that the child’s name was to be “John.” He then utters these words.

And what do we hear? Jesus has come to remove our condemnation. And he longs for us to know His love. With that in mind, we’re now going look at three things. First, the curse of condemnation. Second, the cause of our condemnation. And, third, the cure for condemnation.

I. THE CURSE OF CONDEMNATION

First, the curse of condemnation. That is, how we experience this in our daily lives.

A) A Definition

1. Simply stated

Let's start with a definition. Keeping it simple, Merriam Webster refers to it as a censure. "The university hastily issued a condemnation of antisemitism and any calls for Jewish genocide."

2. Pushing further

Pushing a bit further, *The Dictionary of Biblical Themes* puts it this way (READ), "An act of judgment, in which someone rebukes and denounces the actions and motivations of others."

B) Our Experience

How do we experience that? How does the curse of condemnation come into our lives?

1. From others

From others. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Rubbish. The closer the person, the deeper the wound. We know this (READ Proverbs 12:18; 26:18-19).

2. From ourselves

Condemnation comes through others. But also from ourselves. "You should not have asserted yourself." "You were a fool to trust or depend on them." "You'll never be enough." "You aren't supposed to have feelings on this, or to have needs." "How could you make such a mistake?"

Such are the voices of condemnation, whether from others or from ourselves.

Application:

How do we know when we are listening to those voices? We move to isolation and withdrawal. Or frustration and lashing out. Both are evidence of injury. We are like wounded animals, seeking protection, by hiding or by biting. And Jesus sees this. He sees this and invites us into something else. But before we get to that, we have to address the cause of this curse.

II. THE CAUSE OF CONDEMNATION

Which brings us to our second point. What's behind this? What's the source, the root?

A) A Rupture

There's a deep rupture, a tear, a wound in this world. Something is broken and crooked.

1. The sense we have

We all sense it. The best things never last. The worst things seem to linger. Something is off.

2. Things falling apart

We can feel it around us and in us. Things are falling apart. There's a disintegration. All is amiss between us and God, us and ourselves, us and one another, us and the physical world.

Illustration:

Maybe you've heard the story told of Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, who once got a bit bored and wanted to have a little fun, so he sent a note to six or so of his "respectable" friends with the same message to each one, "All is discovered; flee at once." As the story goes, two or three of them left the country immediately. One was never heard from again.

B) A Judgment

We have this sense of a rupture. And beneath that, we find the cause - a judgment.

1. Our rebellion

The Bible speaks of this quite plainly (**READ Isaiah 53:6a**). We have turned away from our Creator and Sustainer. We have arched our back towards the One before whom we should be bending the knee. As R. C. Sproul put it, we have committed cosmic treason against our King.

2. God's response

And His just response to this, the verdict and sentence, is condemnation. (**READ Romans 6:23a**) This is what lies behind and beneath the disintegration we experience. We have turned away from God. We have given Him a grand obscene gesture and said, "Leave me alone. I can handle things on my own." Respecting our choice, He then gives us what we want - now and forever.

This is the cause of the curse of our condemnation. And why we need Christmas.

Application:

But before we go any further, there are a few things that are worth considering. That deep sense, that intuition and knowledge we carry of our condemnation is what drives so much of what we see. And so much of what we do. For starters, it's why much good is done in the world. It's what drives so many of us to live right, to do the right thing. We want to balance the scales in our favor, to make amends. Please hear me. That's, at best, a sub-Christian motive.

There's something else. This sense of condemnation is what lies beneath so much of our defensiveness. We can't handle the truth. We can't take an accusation. We can't bear criticism or any correction. Why? Our goodness is all we see and know that we have. It can't be lost.

Jesus sees this too. And, again, He is inviting us into something so much more. He has removed the condemnation. He has taken it away by taking it on Himself (**READ Isaiah 53:6**).

III. THE CURE FOR CONDEMNATION

Which brings us to the cure for our condemnation and the Benedictus. I want to focus on the last part (**READ Luke 1:76-79**). Amazing words spoken over this child. He will be a herald.

A) The Message

John will grow and will go forth preparing the way. He will go with a threefold message.

1. Salvation has come

Salvation has come. And this salvation is tied to the forgiveness of sin - the wiping out of the debt. Imagine how this would land on the old priest, so experienced in the temple sacrifices.

2. By God's tender mercy

Salvation has come by God's tender mercy - by the pity, the kindness of the Lord, an affection deeply felt. Think how this would land on Zechariah after those long months of contemplation.

3. As a light to the people

Salvation has come by God's tender mercy as a light to the people. Dawn had finally come. The shadows finally put to flight. Just as the prophets had said. The Lord was finally coming.

B) The Implications

Salvation has come by God's tender mercy as a light to the people. And the implications of this? What might this mean to those voices of condemnation, the judgments against us?

1. Forever silenced

For those who accept this and receive it, such words will now never come from God. It is finished. All is well. Such words of condemnation, of censure, of judgment - forever silenced.

2. Yet still surfacing

But what of those voices that still surface from others? What are we to make of them? Satan - as the tempter, accuser, and deceiver - breathes out such lies. We will hear them from others too. And we will hear them from ourselves. To each of them, we can say in response, "You don't know the half of it. I'm so much worse. But the Lord loves me so much more than I can know."

That's the cure for our condemnation. A love that displaces our condemnation.

Application:

But what of the doubts that come? How can I know I am His? We read this earlier. The Apostle John wrote of three tests to give us rest - the doctrinal, moral, and love tests. Are we orthodox in our beliefs, striving to be obedient in our lives, and serving others? Yes? Then rest.

But what of a guilt that won't go away? "I can't forgive myself." I want to be clear on this (**READ Romans 8:1**). Why isn't God's forgiveness enough for you? To receive His pardon is to honor Him. To refuse it is to reject His provision. It is to prop up your standards over His.

Jesus has come to remove our condemnation. Lay hold of His pardon. Lay hold of it.

CONCLUSION:

Gift cards come in all forms these days and, given how easy they are to pass on, can be a popular gift this time of year. The problem is not on the giving end but the receiving. Millions of gift cards go unused each year. Some \$21 billion is just floating out there. Almost two-thirds of Americans say they have at least one tucked away. Sometimes this is because of inertia - it's for a store we don't like or with an inconvenient location. But we gain nothing by holding onto them. In fact, because of inflation, over time we actually lose something. Their value drops. So a good deal of gifts go wasted. Which, when you think about it, is a good deal of disappointment for the givers. Why? Those gift cards were meant to be used, not cast aside and then forgotten.

With the message of Christmas, we have a gift of infinite value set before us, given to us by God through Christ. Our fear can be exchanged for faith. Our despair can be exchanged for hope. And our condemnation exchanged for love. This gift is not meant to be set aside and hidden away. It is meant to be taken up into our hands and taken deep into our hearts. This gift is far better than anything we could ever imagine. And it is needed so much more than we know.

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