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## Sermon John 3:16 and the Atonement

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# **John 3:16 and the Atonement**

By

Scott G. Sinclair

A central teaching of Christianity is that by becoming incarnate as the human being, Jesus, God brought salvation to the world. This teaching appears in today's gospel. We have the famous quote, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This central teaching of Christianity raises the question of how the coming of Jesus brought salvation. How can the life of one person have produced salvation for the entire world?

One popular answer to this question is that by suffering on the cross Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. I call this the parking ticket theory. Long ago a priest whom I knew personally had a no-parking zone right outside his residence. He thought that he had an absolute right to park outside his own home. Does anyone here feel that you have an absolute right to park outside your home? In any case, that's what the priest felt, and he kept parking in the forbidden space, and, of course, kept getting tickets which he ignored. The inevitable occurred. The cumulative fine became enormous, and the man was arrested. When the judge discovered that the accused was an Episcopal priest, who presumably should have been setting an example of law-abiding behavior, the judge doubled the fine. The priest had no way to pay. But salvation was near. The priest had a wealthy relative who paid the bill. So too the argument goes that by suffering on the cross Jesus paid off the debt that we have incurred through our sins.

There are many problems with the parking ticket theory, but here I will only mention two. First, if Jesus paid off our debt, salvation would be automatic for everyone. Once a debt is paid, the problem is solved. Nothing more needs to be done. So far as I know, the priest did not acknowledge that he had been irresponsible or even promise never to ignore parking tickets in the future. Thanks to his rich relative he got a free pass automatically. So too if Jesus on the cross paid for our sins, we do not need to do anything; indeed, no one needs to do anything. Everyone's sins have been canceled. A second problem with the parking ticket theory is that it assumes that God inflicts on us the punishment for sin. Just as the police arrested the miscreant priest, God clobbers or will clobber us for our misdeeds. However, if God loves sinners, God would not enjoy clobbering us. To use the words of today's gospel, "God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world."

The famous quote from this morning's gospel does not endorse the parking ticket theory but instead emphasizes that Christ's gift of salvation only comes to those who have faith in him. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* may not perish but may have eternal life."

Faith is that trust in God's love for us that enables us to let God guide what we do. If

we have faith, we believe that God wants what is best for us. If we follow God's guidance, we will be better off, and, if we ignore God's guidance, we will end up worse off. *God* does not punish us for our sins. Instead, our sins themselves destroy us and through us destroy others. For example, the abuse of alcohol and drugs is sinful precisely because it destroys people, first the abusers and then the rest of us who are endangered by their behavior.

Ah, but someone will say, don't many people get away with their crimes and suffer no harm? To this today's gospel also has a reply. If we do what is wrong, we are afraid of the truth, and the fearful consequence is that we will always have to hide. "All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." One of my brothers was for a time in law enforcement, and he noted that criminals who have escaped apprehension are always trying to hide, are always on the run. This state of constant avoidance and fear is in its way as bad as being caught and ending up in prison. But if it is bad to be constantly hiding from law enforcement, how much worse is it to be constantly hiding from ourselves? No one wants to face the fact that they are destroying themselves and others. No one wants to think that they are a monster.

Yet, all of us have some aspect of our lives in which we are being monstrous, or at least we have a relative or close friend who does. What is the most monstrous part of your life that you do not like to face, or what is the monstrous part of the life of someone you love? Is it drinking too much? Abusing someone? Is it cheating at work or in a marriage? Is it a hatred for some individual or group, a hatred that constantly preoccupies you or someone close to you? Or is it even hatred for yourself because you cannot accept how you have failed to live up to your own aspirations? Or is it something else which you should know well but are afraid to acknowledge even to yourself?

Today's gospel has good news for monsters. If we have faith that God has no desire to condemn the world, but instead, loves it, then we have faith that God is greater than our sins. If we turn to God, we can begin to face the truth and become new and better human beings.

Now is an especially appropriate time for us all to trust in God's love and stop hiding. This is the middle of Lent, a season in which we are to acknowledge our sins. And in just two weeks we will once more re-enact Christ's suffering and death and the divine love for a sinful world that this sacrifice reveals. Let us then trust in that love, and let it illumine the darkness in each of our lives. Let us accept the truth about ourselves in the light of the greater truth that God loves us even as we are, and that because God loves us as we are, God can change us into something better.