

Whoever Believes in Him

5/7 of Series 3:16

John 3: 16

08-30-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

“Just trust me,” the jumpmaster said. Right! I was perched in the doorway of a *Cessna 172* airplane 2,800 feet above the earth. The only thing between me and the ground was a flimsy, nylon parachute.

At 18 years of age, a friend and I had traveled to the Jackson County Airport near Jefferson, Georgia to learn how to **skydive**. I soon had second thoughts. The instructor limped out on crutches—something about a bad landing. But he assured us that skydiving was perfectly safe. Then he gave us the old parachute rigger’s guarantee: *“If the parachute fails to work for any reason, just bring it back for a full refund!”*

After a day of instruction, we were finally ready. A coin flip had won me the dubious honor of going first. I checked the static line for the hundredth time and then scooted to the door. With one foot balanced on a wheel and two hands clinging to the strut, I heard the jumpmaster yell, “GO!”

I. Whoever Believes in Him

Today we continue a worship series entitled **3:16** as we explore the meaning of **John 3:16**. Let’s repeat the verse together: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* This morning we are focusing upon the critical phrase: **“whoever believes in him.”**

Throughout this sermon series, you have heard one word used time and again: **“grace.”** *Amazing* grace—but then, all grace *is* amazing! **Grace** is God’s free gift of love and mercy given to each of us. We cannot earn it any more than we earn the beauty of the rising sun or sparkling stars. We do not deserve it any more than we deserve the taste of sweet peaches or the smell of honeysuckle. We cannot pay for it any more than we can pay for our first breath or our next breath.

Paul summarized the gospel message by saying that **salvation comes by grace through faith**. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, we can enter into right relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus told Nicodemus: *“You MUST be born again.”* Implicit in our Lord’s words is the promise that *“You CAN be born again.”* In Christ, we can be new creatures where the old has passed away and the new has come.

Anyone who has ever heard me preach for any length of time knows that I always err on the side of grace. In Jesus’ life and ministry, he portrayed God as our heavenly Father who loves us beyond all imagination. The Lord God Almighty, creator of the heavens and the earth, seeks to be in right relationship with you and me.

BUT there is one catch. Like any gift, we must accept God’s grace. God woos, calls, and invites, but we have to respond: salvation comes by **grace through faith**. John 3:16 says: *“Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* Max Lucado wrote: *“God loves you with an unearthly love. You can’t win it by being winsome. You can’t lose it by being a loser. BUT you can be blind enough to resist it.”* (40)

II. Believes in Him

What does “**BELIEVE in him**” mean? Belief has three parts or movements:

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| 1) | Faith of the Head | Knowledge |
| 2) | Faith of the Hands and Feet | Action |
| 3) | Faith of the Heart | Belief/trust |

Faith of the Head: Knowledge

The first part of faith is all in our **head**. A knowledge and understanding of what we believe as Christians is of paramount importance. Faith is **belief in** God's truth revealed in Jesus Christ and recorded in Holy Scripture.

The content of our theological belief is important. We affirm our core beliefs in statements of faith such as the *Apostles Creed*. These creeds or statements of belief encapsulate the essential elements of Christian theology. Such faith is even more critical in a time and culture that offer a smorgasbord of religious tenets and beliefs.

The content of our belief *is* important. We need to immerse ourselves in Scripture and abide in God's Spirit so that we may know what is real . . . and what is counterfeit. If we have not wrestled with what we believe and can in some way articulate it to others, then we possess someone else's religion and not our own. And we are susceptible to being deceived about the truth.

Christian discipleship is a lifelong invitation to **continuing education**. 1 Peter 2:2 says, *"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."*

Faith of the Hands and Feet: Deeds

A faith of the head extends to our **hands and feet**. *"Faith without works is dead."* (James 2: 26) **Paul Harvey** once said, *"If you don't live it, you don't believe it!"*

James used what would be a humorous example if it were not so poignant. Suppose we know a brother or sister in Christ who is without food or clothes. What good is it if we say to him, *"Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed."* But we do NOTHING about his physical needs! What good is it? *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* (James 2: 17)

In the cartoon strip, *"Peanuts,"* Snoopy shivered in the winter snow. Charlie Brown dressed in a warm coat said to Linus, "Snoopy looks kind of cold, doesn't he?" Linus replied, "I'll say he does, maybe we'd better go over and comfort him." So they walked over and Charlie Brown said, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy!" And Linus echoed, "Yes, be of good cheer!" Then they walked away—leaving a very puzzled—and very cold—dog behind.

In 1962, two businessmen named Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman started *Blue Ribbon Sports* which imported athletic shoes into the United States. They each invested about \$500 in the start up business. In 1966, they opened their first retail outlet in

California. They renamed the business after the Greek goddess of victory named **Nike**. Thirty years later, Nike is the largest sports company in the world.

In 1988, Nike launched a new ad campaign that introduced a new phrase to our culture. Each commercial highlighted an athlete in the midst of an arduous workout. At the conclusion, three bold words appeared on the screen: **“Just Do It!”**

Paul: faith and works. James: works and faith. Two sides of the same reality. Head combined with hands and feet. Know it and do it.

Faith of the Heart: Trust

A faith of the head, hands, and feet is not complete, however, with a faith of the **heart**. Right belief and right living is not enough. We also must believe with our hearts and the entirety of our being.

Good theology is not sufficient. James 2: 19 says: *“You believe that there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!”* The devil and his demons have good theology—they KNOW beyond a shadow of doubt there is one God and Jesus of Nazareth is his son. Good behavior is not sufficient. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time diligently followed the law but missed its spirit.

Head, hands, and feet faith must be coupled with **heartfelt trust**. Knowing that Jesus Christ is THE Savior and Lord must become a personal confession that Jesus Christ is MY Savior and Lord. **“Salvation by grace through faith.”** Such faith is how we appropriate and receive the gospel so that it is our own.

Lucado writes: *“Can I really trust that ‘whoever believes in him shall not perish?’ Jesus invitation seems too simple. We gravitate to other verbs. ‘Work’ has a better ring to it. ‘Whoever works for him will be saved.’ ‘Satisfy’ fits nicely. ‘Whoever satisfies him will be saved.’ But believe? Shouldn’t I do more?”*(p. 76-77)

Of course, that’s the entire point of grace—God has already done everything for us. All we have to do is believe and accept the Lord’s gift of salvation. Our part is to trust—to trust that God has done what we could never do: save us from sin and death.

III. Whoever

“WHOEVER believes” Who is the “who” in “whoever”? In Max Lucado’s book 3:16 Numbers of Hope, the author points out that “whoever” includes however, whenever, wherever—and I would add—whatever.

Whoever

“Whoever furls 3:16 as a banner for the ages. Whoever unrolls the welcome mat of heaven to humanity. Whoever invites the world to God.” (p. 66) Jesus could have made the invitation much more restrictive and changed the “whoever” to “whatever.” “Whatever Jewish man believes in me,” “Whatever person who is good enough,” “Whatever person gets their act together and follows the rule.” Instead, God throws the door wide open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry, to every Tammy, Dora, and Henrietta, to WHOEVER. *“Whoever makes it clear: God exports his grace worldwide. For those who attempt to restrict it, Jesus has a word: WHOEVER!”* (66)

However

Lucado goes on to point out that “*God’s ‘whoever’ policy has a ‘however’ benefit.*” (69) God’s invitation specifies to “*come as you are.*”

All of us have seen TV shows and movies that depict the act of **childbirth**. Depending upon the setting, some scenes are dramatic while others are humorous. But there always comes that moment when the nurse places the baby in the mother’s or father’s arms. Most of the time, the child looks like a double for the baby on the Gerber’s baby food jars—fresh, clean, round-faced, and cooing.

As a veteran of the labor and delivery ward, I’m here to testify that such images are false advertising! Reality is quite a different matter. Screaming newborns are often skin-wrinkled, red faced, cone-headed, and slime-covered. But when the nurse places the baby into a parent’s arm, the father and mother have never seen a more beautiful creature.

Our heavenly Father accepts us “as is.” God loves us first and loves us best. Grace extends to however we might be.

During my teenage years, I attended a small country church outside of Woodstock, Georgia. I am a seasoned veteran of fifth Sunday night singings, revivals, and multi-verse altar calls. Much of my theology and spiritual identify was formed in that setting. After singing ump-teen stanzas of ***Just as I Am***, the words of the hymn permeated my mind, heart, and soul. Hear two of the verses:

*Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in thee to find. O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

As I said last week, God accepts us just as we are and then calls us to become the people he created us to be. The Lord loves us too much to leave us alone. He wants the very best for his children and will settle for nothing less. Salvation is free, but our response demands the entirety of our lives.

Whenever

“*Whoever believes in me*” also has a “**whenever**” clause. We are called to respond to the divine invitation at any time in our lives.

We are **never too young** to respond to God’s invitation. Studies show that the majority of Christians accept Christ as their Savior by the time they are twenty-one years old. Our early years can set the course for an entire lifetime.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 urges: “*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth . . .*” In 1 Timothy 4: 12, Paul instructed the youth minister: “*Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.*”

We are never too young . . . but we are also **never too old**. Jesus told a parable (Matthew 20) about a landowner who needed help for a day. So early in the morning he hired a crew and promised them a good wage. As the day went on, he hired another group at 9:00 and then a few more at noon. In order to get the work done, he hired still more at 3:00 and a few more at 5:00 just an hour before quitting time.

At the end of the day, the landowner lined the workers up to pay them—starting with the ones hired last. Much to their surprise, they received a full day’s wages—the same as those who had worked all day. The group hired early in the morning were outraged. However, the owner said: “Did I not pay you exactly what I promised? If I choose to pay these others the same amount, what is that to you? Or are you jealous because I am gracious?”

We are never too young or old; but we can stubbornly **wait too long**. During my youth, revival preachers would call people to the altar by saying, “You may get hit by a train on the way home tonight. Are you ready?” I don’t believe in such methods . . . but life IS uncertain. Why wait?

To put a more positive spin on the invitation, why would you wait? The party has started and you are invited to join in the good time. Eternal life means abundant life here on earth. Don’t believe the lie that “the sinners have much more fun.” Joyful living is found in God’s kingdom.

Wherever

“*Whoever believes in me*” also has a “**wherever**” clause. Wherever you find yourself today, it is never too far to return back to God. Or to be more scripturally and theologically correct, we are never too far away to discover that the Lord has actually been with us all along.

One of Jesus’ most familiar parables is entitled *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. A young boy wastes his father’s wealth in wild living. Only when he has nothing does he realize what he truly lost. In the depths of his depraved life, he came to himself and began the long journey back home. And his father welcomed him home with open arms.

I don’t know what far off land you have journeyed in. But I do know that it is never so far that you cannot return home. Your heavenly Father is waiting.

Whatever

“*Whoever believes in me*” also has a “**whatever**” section. It is our egocentric, sinful natures to make our experiences normative for others. If I was saved in a certain way, then everyone else should be saved in the same way. However, we are all unique individuals, and the Spirit works in each of our lives in an amazing variety of ways.

For some, salvation is an emotional, memorable moment in life. For others, they grew into faith. It’s a bit like falling in love. Some couples here fell in love at first sight. You just KNEW. For others, it was a slow, dawning realization, and you would be hard pressed to say when you first knew.

“What if Moses had said the only way to encounter God is through a burning bush that is not consumed or if Paul had insisted that true conversion requires a blinding light?”

The family of faith would be quite small—and many of us would spend our days starting at shrubbery or the sky!” (*Baptists Today*, August 2009, p. 7, John Pierce)

Conclusion

“Just trust me,” the jumpmaster said. With one foot balanced on a wheel and two hands clinging to the strut, I heard the jumpmaster yell, “GO!” So I went. Sure enough, the parachute opened, and I drifted safely down to the earth.

We can know the Bible and the beliefs of the Methodist church. We can do all the right things. We can talk the talk and walk the walk. But there comes grace-filled moments in each of our lives when the Holy Spirit says, “Just trust me.” And we can ignore the call. Or we can jump.

“*Whoever believes in him.*” The “whoever” includes you and me. Just trust God and JUMP!