

The Ring of Truth – John 3:31-36
Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis
Union Baptist Church – July 1, 2018

I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of John, chapter 3, verses 31 through 36. This morning we're continuing on in our study of the Gospels, finishing today what we started last week of John the Baptist's conversation with his disciples. If you'll remember, John's disciples were deeply concerned that people had begun flocking to Jesus instead of John for baptism. They were troubled that the focus of the spiritual awakening in Israel seemed to be shifting away from their beloved teacher and mentor because they'd fallen into the worldly temptation to compete and compare and equate popularity or success with value and worth.

But in responding to their concerns, John the Baptist patiently explained to them a much better way of approaching life and ministry...God's way...that would free them from competing and comparing and from the endless search for value and worth in accomplishments, possessions, popularity, or any other such dead-end method. This better way was based on understanding and believing a universal and life-changing principle: that everything we have...our talents, our abilities, our possessions, our brain power, our jobs, even life and breath itself...everything is given to us as gifts from God. We can't receive even one thing unless God gives it to us.

What this means is that we have no basis for taking credit for them...for boasting and trying claim value and worth because of them. And when we truly believe that in our hearts, we can give up competing, comparing and boasting and begin giving glory and thanks to God instead; resting in the fact that in Christ he loves us with a love that never changes and that's never based on our performance, our abilities, our popularity, our good looks, our possessions, or our calling in life. Our value and worth is fixed forever and proven by the fact that God loved us enough, even when we were rebelling against him, to give his only Son to die on the cross for our sins, paying the penalty we deserve and bearing our shame so we could be restored to love relationship with him.

You see, John the Baptist was at peace with this reality, and it had given him great freedom to gladly fade into the background when the time was right, so all attention could be given to the only One deserving glory and honor and praise...Jesus Christ...God's only Son who had now arrived to carry out that mission of the cross. John viewed himself as simply the friend of the bridegroom at a wedding celebration, whose mission was to make the wedding arrangements and prepare everything, not for himself, but for the bridegroom. And now that the bridegroom, Jesus, had arrived, John was completely at peace with being in the background and rejoicing in the bridegroom's special day. John said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." And far from being heart-broken about it, he described himself as full of joy! This is where we left off last week.

II. REJECTING EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY FROM HEAVEN (Verses 31 to 32)

So let's continue on now, first with verses 31 and 32, which I've labeled in your sermon notes: *Rejecting Eyewitness Testimony from Heaven*. Beginning in verse 31:

31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.

Now there is some debate here about whether verses 31 to 36 are the words of John the Baptist as he continues to speak to his disciples, or if this is John the Apostle's further explanation of the situation after the fact. But it's kind of a moot point anyway, because in either case these are God-breathed words of Scripture and represent absolutely true conclusions about what was really going on here in relation to John the Baptist and Jesus.

Well, what we first notice is that these verses begin with a contrast between he who comes from above, or from heaven, with he who is of the earth and belongs to the earth. And in the context it's clear that this is intended to be a contrast between Jesus, who comes from heaven, and John the Baptist, who is of the earth. As John the Baptist had already clearly stated to his disciples and to the Jewish religious leaders, there was no comparison between the two. John did not even consider himself worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus.

God had been speaking powerfully through John the Baptist, in such a way that people had been coming to him in droves to hear and respond to his message. To them John was impressive and unlike anyone they'd ever known, and many, many people received his message and believed his testimony. Yet John was still just a human being who had lived his entire existence on earth. This unchangeable fact limited him to the role of a prophet. His earthly existence meant that when speaking about heaven and heavenly things he could only speak in a second-hand kind of way about things he trusted to be true because they came from God, but that he had not seen and experienced himself firsthand. But now someone who had actually lived in heaven...who had actually been there and seen and experienced firsthand what it's like and what it's all about...that someone who had come directly from heaven itself was here bearing witness and testifying and sharing with people things he had actually seen and heard there in heaven.

The contrast between John and Jesus is kind of like the difference between someone reading the creation account in Genesis for us and trying to explain it and fill in the gaps, versus the Creator himself showing up to give us the full play-by-play of what it was like and how he did it, and answer any questions we may have. There would be no comparison, would there? If we had to choose which explanation to fully receive and believe, we would of course choose the one from the actual Creator who witnessed it firsthand and experienced every part of it. And yet the irony of it all, is that most people were much more willing to accept the testimony of John the Baptist, who was of the earth and could only speak second-hand, than the eyewitness testimony of Jesus, who is above all and had come from heaven to testify about heavenly things he had seen and heard and experienced firsthand.

The actual Creator was here to fill people in on what they needed to know, and yet they tragically refused to listen and receive his testimony. And that's even in spite of the fact that his testimony was accompanied by miracles and signs from heaven and had the unmistakable ring of truth. People were rejecting the purest form of truth available: eyewitness testimony from heaven and the Creator himself. The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* offers this well-put explanation of why this is so: *"By nature, people believe what suits them rather than what bears the marks of authenticity. The fall of the human race resulted in darkened minds that hear selectively. It is the Holy Spirit that opens people's minds to the truth."* In

order to believe and receive the eyewitness testimony of Jesus, the Holy Spirit needs to do a work within us as he opens our eyes to our desperate need and we cry out to him for mercy.

III. RECEIVING EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY FROM HEAVEN (Verses 33 to 35)

So let's look now, in verses 33 to 35, at the alternative to rejecting Jesus' eyewitness testimony from heaven. And that is: receiving it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Picking up in verse 33:

33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

Do you see the Trinity in these verses? Of course the word, "Trinity," isn't in Scripture, but the reality of our Three-In-One God is written all through its pages and is even hinted at as early as Genesis. Here in these verses we see the Trinity in action: God the Father loves Jesus, the Son and gives him the Holy Spirit without measure. In fact, the Father has given ALL THINGS into the hand of Jesus. In other words, there isn't one thing or person that isn't under his authority and doesn't belong to him. There are countless people denying that authority and claiming Jesus has no ownership over them, but that doesn't do anything to change what's really true. We can acknowledge what's true now and live in healthy, surrendered, love relationship with him, or we can acknowledge later when there's no other option and it's too late to experience his love.

We also see in these verses that God the Father sent the Son on a mission to earth and the words he speaks aren't just good, moral teaching, but instead the very words of God...completely trustworthy and describing true reality like no human wisdom ever could. And yet, God gives each person the choice of how to respond to these words of God – the eyewitness testimony, of Jesus, the Son. And notice what a person is doing when they receive the testimony of Jesus: ***Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.*** If the testimony of Jesus is the very words of God, then to receive and believe his testimony is to affirm that God is true; something that's described here as "setting our seal." And conversely, to reject Jesus' testimony is to call God a liar.

As we think about this idea of setting our seal to the fact that God is true, I want you to imagine yourself as possessing something called *a signet ring*. You've probably heard of a signet ring before. Perhaps you even have one. They've been around since ancient history, but according to a recent Bloomberg article they're experiencing a renewed popularity these days: "the signet ring...[historically]...was used as a personal signature or symbol of family heritage. Typically it bore a family crest or another symbol representing an individual on its distinguishable flat bezel. A design was usually engraved...either directly into the metal of the ring or an inset gem, and then pressed into wax or clay to create the personal seal, or signature."

The idea behind the signet ring was something physically attached to one specific person that could be used by them to certify the truthfulness of documents...to put their signature on something showing that they were putting their reputation, their family honor, their solemn word behind what was stated in the document. With the signet ring they were putting their seal of approval on the truthfulness of what was stated. Their seal did not make the message true, but it acknowledged and took a stand on its truthfulness. In using their signet ring, people were publicly certifying that they were convinced of the truthfulness of what was written and would stand by it no matter the cost to them.

Though few of us today have an actual, physical signet ring that we wear and use in this manner, what we discover here in John chapter 3 is that we each do have a spiritual signet ring which God invites us to use as we respond to the message of Jesus. And he's given us the freedom to either use or withhold our signet ring as we listen to the message of Jesus. And what we choose will have eternal implications. In fact, everything hinges on how we respond to the message of Jesus.

IV. RECEIVING OR REJECTING: TWO DIFFERENT OUTCOMES (Verse 36)

Let's look now at our final verse for today, verse 36, which I've labeled in your notes: *Receiving or Rejecting: Two Different Outcomes*. Listen to this simple verse that clearly states, in no uncertain terms, how everything hinges on what we do with our spiritual signet ring in relation to the testimony of Jesus:

36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Can it get any clearer than that? The gospel, the good news of Christ and his work on the cross, is so simple, and yet so hard for sinful, hard-hearted, proud, independent people – a description that applies to all of us, by the way – to humbly accept and receive, even though the promise for those who will do so is forgiveness, joy, peace, love and eternal life with God; beginning now on earth and enduring for eternity in heaven itself, a place wonderful beyond our wildest imaginations. What it takes for each of us is the work of the Holy Spirit to give us the humility and willingness to surrender to God’s simple plan of salvation and eternal life through true repentance and faith in Christ. If you’re not there yet today, talk to God. You can do that right now. Cry out to him for what you need. He’ll give you what you need as you call out to him.

Well, I can’t improve upon the simplicity of God’s plan of salvation through Christ presented in verse 36, but I can sum it up for you:

- 1) The invitation is for everyone: **Whoever**;
- 2) The invitation is accepted through **simple belief in the Son**: hearing his testimony from heaven and receiving it with faith as something you want for yourself;
- 3) The invitation is to **eternal life** – God making you spiritually alive right now and at peace with him, forgiven of all your sin, filled with his Holy Spirit and walking through life with him now and then forever in his presence in heaven someday.

So simple and such a wonderful outcome!

But the frightening reality as well, is that there’s another outcome that is just as real and true for all who continue denying Christ and his authority over them...who willfully choose to reject the simple message of Jesus. I’ll sum up this second outcome for you:

- 1) It also applies to everyone – **Whoever**;
- 2) Specifically it applies to everyone **who does not obey the Son** – that Greek word translated, “obey,” means “to not allow one’s self to be

persuaded...to refuse or withhold belief...and obedience (*Blue Letter Bible*). It indicates a willful rejection and refusal to believe what is true...a hearing of what Jesus has to say, but a choice to reject or ignore it...Maybe even a belief that what he says is true, but a refusal to accept it for yourself.

- 3) The outcome is ***not seeing life***, but remaining ***under the wrath of God*** – the place where we all are until we receive the salvation God is providing us through Jesus Christ, who on the cross paid the penalty we deserve for our sin. For those who reject the Son, instead of enjoying forgiveness and eternal life in the presence of God in heaven, there will be God's wrath and punishment for sin in hell.

Two very different outcomes, and all hinging on one simple thing: how we choose to respond to Jesus Christ and his firsthand testimony from heaven.

V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Have you made that choice yet to receive his testimony or have you been putting it off or trying to convince yourself that it's not really true? I want to tell any of you today who still haven't made that choice, that I and many others here have taken our spiritual signet rings and pressed them into the wax of the scroll containing Jesus' testimony from heaven. We know in our hearts and minds, as I'm quite certain you also do, that the testimony of Jesus, and the other words of Scripture, have the unmistakable *ring of truth* from God himself originating in heaven. Though at times difficult to understand for earthlings, no testimony is more worthy of being certified as true than the testimony of Jesus. And I pray today, that the Holy Spirit would give you everything you need right now to receive his testimony and come to eternal life as you simply acknowledge your sin and your need for salvation, and place your faith in what Christ did for you on the cross – the place where he paid the penalty for your sin and then proved the penalty had been paid and satisfied forever by his resurrection from the dead. Repent, believe and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

The invitation to receive his testimony and the two very different outcomes that result from what we choose are not hard to understand. Listen to one more presentation of it from 1 John 5:9-12:

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. 11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Choose life today! Be like those who did so in the book of 1 Thessalonians, described by Paul this way: “...**you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come**” (1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10).

And for those of us that have already chosen life by the power of the Spirit, I would like to ask: Does it show in your life? One thing we can take away from verse 36 of John chapter 3, is that saving faith in Christ results in growing obedience to his teaching and commands. Belief in Christ is contrasted with not obeying Christ...refusing to believe AND obey him. One of the strong aspects of recent generations of the church here in America has been the wonderful re-emphasis that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone – not by works – that repentance and belief in Christ alone is all that’s needed for eternal salvation and adoption into God’s forever family. All of which is totally true and theologically correct. But with this emphasis has come a corresponding neglect of what James, the brother of Jesus, taught us in the book of James: that true saving faith is always evidenced by love-motivated works, as people saved through Christ are changed from the inside out and by the power of the Spirit begin obeying his teachings and becoming more and more like Christ in their words and actions.

So the question we all need to ask ourselves today is: Having professed faith in Christ, am I now walking as his fully surrendered disciple, learning from him and putting his teachings and his life priorities into practice in all of my life; including church, work, home and everything I do? Remember, Jesus instructed us to make **disciples** – in other words, people who would walk with him and live like him, not just people who make a profession of faith but never get after actually following Jesus. Do I see in my life growing obedience to Christ and the fruit of his Spirit? And if I don’t see much evidence of that, what’s wrong? Where have I gotten off

track? Am I really pursuing Christ or am I just keeping him in my Sunday church compartment? And depending on what we find, we may need to re-start with repentance...being honest before God about sin and the things we've put above him that are keeping us from growing in him and walking into the good works he's prepared for us.

There could even be someone here today who's been attending church all their life who needs to go back to the start and make absolute sure that that moment of salvation, of true repentance and surrendered faith in Christ, really happened. Scripture teaches us to test ourselves to see if we're really in the faith, and if there's no fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we should be very concerned. If that's what we find, the best thing we could ever do is go back to that place where we come in true heart repentance and express again our belief in Christ and our desire for him to have his way in our lives...where we tell him we're finally ready to be his disciple and not just someone who's made a profession of faith, but never grown up to maturity.

And finally as we close, the picture of a signet ring we saw today is a reminder that surrendered faith in Christ is meant to be "out there" for others to see. A signet ring was pressed into wax for others to see and know that a person was taking a public stand to certify the truth of something; no matter the cost to themselves or what anyone else might think. It was not private. It was meant to give a message to other people and influence how they responded to the contents of the document. Similarly, when we believe in Jesus and receive his testimony, it's meant to be publicly declared and not kept to ourselves. True saving faith in Jesus is taking a stand and declaring aloud no matter the cost that we certify our belief that God is alive and well and his Son, Jesus, is the only way to receive the salvation and eternal life he offers to all.

When we do this...when we take a stand...when we're not ashamed of the gospel and are willing to boldly declare it...God uses that to influence others to do the same. In his mysterious ways, he uses us as part of the process of drawing others to the same saving faith in Christ he's given to us. Might we get ridiculed for sharing our faith in Jesus? Might we endure mocking and persecution? Might some people reject our message and even reject us? Absolutely. We're in an intense spiritual battle where most of the world is unwittingly under the influence of Satan and seeking to destroy and suppress and tear down the simple message

of salvation through Christ. But guess what? We have the secret, the power of God, the game-changer, the Gospel, that can bring victory and freedom to countless people when we're willing to boldly send it out, no matter the cost to ourselves, sealed with our ring of truth, our personal signet ring, certifying the truthfulness of the message we're sharing. May God give us the boldness and courage and passion to send that message out with our personal seal in every way we can!