

Main Idea: According to John 3:22-30, when a person possesses genuine, Holy Spirit produced faith as the result of experiencing the new birth, that person will exhibit a passion to see Christ exalted, like John the Baptist did.

Warning: It’s possible to possess a deficient faith in Jesus.

1. Beware of believing in Jesus *for* something.
2. Beware of believing in Jesus *plus* something.
3. Beware of believing in Jesus *without* something.

The Bottom Line: The evidence of genuine faith is a desire to see Christ exalted.

I. Scene one: We see the test of faith (22-26).

- A. John the Baptist faced the challenge of competition (22-24).
 1. Jesus does not exist for me.
 2. If my faith is genuine, I will acknowledge that I exist for Jesus.
- B. John the Baptist faced the challenge of ceremonialism (25).
 1. Some people put their trust in something they do for God.
 2. Saved people put their trust in what God alone does for them.
- C. John the Baptist faced the challenge of worldly success (26).

II. Scene two: We hear the testimony of faith (27-30).

- A. John shares what he believes about God (27).
- B. John shares what he believes about himself (28-29).
 1. He made it clear who he wasn’t and who he was.
 2. He made it clear that his joy was to make much of Christ.
- C. John shares what he believes about Christ (30).

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following...

1. Does your faith pass the test?
2. Do you have a testimony that exalts Christ?

As we opened God’s Word in our last time together we explored what is arguably the most amazing verse in the entire Bible. *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.*

There is no greater news in the world than this promise. The Bible says that if a person will believe in the Son of God, that person will never pay the penalty he deserves to pay for his sin, but will enjoy abundant life with His Maker for ever and ever.

Sadly, the world is full of people who have never heard this promise, and consequently are perishing, and that ought to grip the heart of every follower of Jesus. As Paul said in Romans 10:14, “How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

Yet there’s a question inherent in John 3:16 that we must face, a question with eternal implications. Jesus said that everlasting life belongs to the person who believes, that’s clear. But what does it mean to *believe*?

There are many people in the world today who are claiming the promise of John 3:16 yet are in great danger. They’re in danger because they have defined the word *believe* differently than Jesus defined it.

It’s sort of like the man who said, as he was jumping out of the plane, that he *believed* the parachute would take him safely to his desired destination. But he perished that day because he left the plane without putting on the parachute in which he professed to believe.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

To put it another way, there's a difference between *saying* you believe and truly *believing*. That goes for parachutes and more significantly for salvation.

Every so often we hear a siren go off across the street from the church, and whenever I hear it I know that someone's in trouble. I'd like to begin this message by sounding a siren, then giving you the bottom line, and then walking through the text to support it.

Warning: *It's possible to possess a deficient faith in Jesus.*

That's not my opinion. That's what Jesus Himself said. Hear Him in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

There's a difference between *saying* "Lord, Lord," and truly *believing* in the Lord. I know that because in John 3:16 Jesus said that if a person *believes* in the Son, he has eternal life, while in Matthew 7:21 He says that some who *say* "Lord, Lord" will not enter His kingdom. So *saying* you believe is different from truly *believing*.

Here's another text. Jesus declared in Luke 13:24-25, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'"

So it's possible, says Jesus, to say you know the Lord and yet end up hearing Him say, "I don't know you."¹

My aim this morning isn't to create doubt in the hearts of God's children. If you believe in His Son and in what He accomplished on the cross for sinners, then you *have* eternal life. That's God's promise in John 3:16 (and in many other places). But the reason you will enjoy the fulfillment of God's promise is because, by His Spirit's gracious enablement, you have responded rightly to the promise, as defined by God. You have *believed*.

So all who have believed have eternal life. That's God's promise. But that raises the question. What does *believe* mean? Specifically, what does *God* mean when He says you must *believe* in His Son? Here's where the confusion lies, for it's possible to possess a deficient faith in Jesus, and I want to sound the siren concerning such faulty faith. For instance...

1. *Beware of believing in Jesus for something.* That's what people were doing in John 2:23, "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and *believed in his name.*" Sounds good, but notice the next sentence in verse 24. "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men."

They believed in Jesus. But it wasn't saving faith. They had ulterior motives. They wanted something out of Jesus, namely more miracles.

It happens today too. People come to Jesus to get more of what they want out of life (health, prosperity, a good family), and the assurance of good things in the life to come. Which means that Jesus is like a gate pass to a ball game. There's no affection for the gate pass. You must have it to get into the game, but once you're in you forget about it.

That's what I mean by believing in Jesus *for something*. Jesus is simply a means to a greater end. That is not saving faith, for Jesus is not a means to something greater. He *is* the something greater, the treasure of all treasures.

¹ As Titus 1:16 says, "They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him."

2. *Beware of believing in Jesus plus something.* For instance, in the book of Galatians Paul warned of people who were teaching that Jesus isn't enough. They said that it's fine to believe in Jesus, but you need to keep the works of the law if you want to go to heaven. That's what a host of sacramental churches are doing in our day, asserting that believing in Jesus isn't enough, and that you need to keep the sacraments to be saved.

Beware of that, beloved. Beware of those who say you need to believe in Jesus *plus something*. Jesus plus religious activity, Jesus plus good works, Jesus plus baptism, etc.

The Bible teaches that saving faith is faith in Jesus alone, for Jesus said that He alone is the way to God (John 14:6).

3. *Beware of believing in Jesus without something.* I'm talking here about easy-believism, the notion that saying you believe in Jesus is the same thing as truly believing in Him. It's faith without the new birth, faith without repentance, faith that doesn't lead to subsequent holy living. That's not true faith.

We've learned from the first part of John 3 that saving faith is the result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit gives birth to spirit," says Jesus in verse 6. And when a person is "born of the Spirit" (verse 8), there will be the unmistakable evidence of the Spirit's presence in that person's life. What's the evidence? Verse 15 says he will "believe in the Son." Verse 21 says he will "live by the truth" and "come into the light" and want it to be known that "what he has done has been done through God."

My friends, that's not John 3:16 faith. Beware of believing in Jesus *for something*, or believing in Jesus *plus something*, or believing in Jesus *without something*.

Which brings us to this question. How can I know if I possess genuine faith? I want to give you the bottom line answer, and then show you that answer in today's text.

The Bottom Line: The evidence of genuine faith is a desire to see Christ exalted.

Faith isn't simply intellectual, although it involves the intellect. Nor is it simply decisional, although it involves a volitional decision. Faith is directional. When a person believes in Jesus, the direction of that person's life shifts from self to Jesus.

To put it another way, when a person possesses genuine, Holy Spirit produced faith as the result of experiencing the new birth, that person will stop living for himself and start living with a passion to honor his Savior, Jesus Christ.

Case in point, John the Baptist. I'll be honest. Today's text seemed out of place to me at first. I couldn't figure out how the end of John 3 related to the first 21 verses of it. Why did the apostle John, the one who wrote this biography of Jesus' life, return to the story of John the Baptist right after telling us about Jesus' teaching on the new birth? What does John the Baptist have to do with the new birth? The answer is that he illustrates the reality of it.

When the new birth occurs, the evidence is faith. What kind of faith? The kind that John exhibited. There are two scenes in today's text. In the first scene (that's verses 22-26), we see the test of faith. In the second scene (verses 27-3), we hear the testimony of faith.

I. Scene one: We see the test of faith (22-26).

John's test came in the form of three challenges.

A. John the Baptist faced the challenge of competition (22-24). “After this, Jesus and his disciples² went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.)”

Verse 22 provides the setting. *After this*, says the text. That is, our story begins sometime after the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The endpoint, says verse 24, is when John was put in prison.

That’s interesting. Why is the apostle John specifying that little detail that this happened before John the Baptist was put in prison? It’s because this is something his readers would not have known. That’s because when you read the synoptic gospels (which had been around for several years by the time John wrote his gospel), it sounds like Jesus didn’t begin His public ministry until *after* John was put in prison.

For instance, Mark 1:14 says, “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” But in our text the apostle John indicates there was actually a time when John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ ministries overlapped and were parallel to each other. When did that happen? John clarifies the timing for us. It took place after Jesus’ temptation and before John’s imprisonment.

So after meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus left Jerusalem with His disciples and headed for the countryside to spend some quality time with His men. John the Baptist was out there too, although he was actually further north at Aenon in the region of Samaria.

The text says that both Jesus and John were baptizing, although as John 4:2 clarifies, Jesus didn’t baptize anyone directly but did so through the hands-on efforts of His disciples. Hendriksen says that by doing so Jesus manifested Himself as being greater than John the Baptist.³

The point is, John the Baptist is now facing something he’d never faced before. *Competition*. As far as baptizing goes, he’s had a corner on the market until now. When people wanted to get right with God, they came to him. But that’s changing.

I don’t know how long this parallel setup lasted, with some people coming to Jesus and others to John. The text just says Jesus was there for “some time”. MacArthur suggests several months.⁴ I do know the effect it had on John’s attendance figures, as we’ll see shortly.

I love this about John. He faced the challenge of competition and passed it with flying colors. John knew what we’re prone to forget, namely, that...

1. *Jesus does not exist for me.* It’s not Jesus *for something*. It’s all for Jesus. That’s true faith. And that’s not just for John either.

2. *If my faith is genuine, I will acknowledge that I exist for Jesus.* Answer this. Would you believe in Jesus if you didn’t get anything out of it except for Jesus? So many people who say they believe in Jesus are really motivated by what He does for them. He’s the Genie who produces healthy kids, a nice bank account, and a free pass to heaven. And it’s the stuff that matters, not Jesus.

They may believe in Jesus, but not with a John 3:16 kind of faith. And so when the test of competition comes, Jesus gets the short end of the stick.

² William Hendriksen says they were probably the six disciples mentioned back in 1:35-51 (p. 146).

³ William Hendriksen, p. 146.

⁴ John MacArthur, p. 125.

B. John the Baptist faced the challenge of ceremonialism (25). “An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.”

Notice that. Some of John’s disciples got into a dispute with a certain unnamed Jew (some manuscripts are plural, “certain Jews”). Wiersbe suggests the possibility that it was Nicodemus. Whoever it was, the group started firing questions and accusations at each other.

About what? It had to do with “the matter of ceremonial washing” (ESV ‘purification’). What’s that mean? It has to do with how people get right with God. Remember, that’s why the crowds are coming to John (and now Jesus) out in the countryside. To clean up their lives. To get baptized.

But the question is, how does a person clean up his or her life? How do you become morally pure? For centuries, the Jews had been answering that question with a list of ceremonial do’s and don’ts.

It hasn’t changed. Even today...

1. *Some people put their trust in something they do for God.* Just ask them. Are you going to heaven when you die? Yes. How do you know? I’ve been baptized. I’ve been a good person. Oh, they believe in Jesus, but that’s not where their trust really lies. It’s Jesus *plus something*.

Please know this, my friend. If John 3 makes anything clear, it’s this...

2. *Saved people put their trust in what God alone does for them.* From start to finish. From the new birth to entering the pearly gates. It’s all of grace and it’s all of God.

So that was the second challenge John faced, the challenge of ceremonialism. Well, sort of. Have you ever noticed that often when people are upset, there is *an* issue that’s bugging them and then there is *the* issue? That there’s the issue they’re talking about, and then there’s the issue that really is on their mind?

I see that here. Notice verse 26, “They came to John [that’s John’s disciples and this unnamed Jew] and said to him, Rabbi, *we have a question about ceremonial washing.*” Is that what they said? No. They said, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

There’s the real issue. *That man.* They’re talking about Jesus but they won’t even bring themselves to say His name. This dispute began as a doctrinal debate (over the matter of ceremonial washing), but now it has turned personal. The issue isn’t baptism. The issue is that in the minds of John’s followers, two ministries are on a collision course. Which brings us to the third test of faith.

C. John the Baptist faced the challenge of worldly success (26). “They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.’”

The jealousy is so thick you can cut it. They won’t even mention Jesus by name. And they seem to be blaming John for this predicament. After all, that man is the one *you testified about*. And there’s exaggeration too. They said that *everyone is going to him*.

That’s what ticks them off. The numbers game.

“Our church is bigger than your church!” “My Sunday School class has more people than your class!”

How do you define success in ministry? By an upward arrow on an attendance chart?

Put yourself in John the Baptist’s sandals for a moment. He started as an unknown out in the wilderness. Then the crowds started coming and he became the main attraction of the day. Some said he was Elijah come again. Even king Herod liked to listen to him. And then the numbers started dropping, and the glory days started fading, and the crowds that once cheered him on were now cheering on another.

So answer this. At which point in John’s ministry was he successful? You can’t measure it by numbers, can you?

But some of John’s followers did. They’re irritated that people are leaving their number and following Jesus. And apparently they think they think John will agree with their assessment. As Barclay observes. “Sometimes a friend’s sympathy can be the worst possible thing for us. It makes us feel sorry for ourselves and encourages us to think that we have not had a fair deal.”⁵

Beloved, as far as success goes, it’s all about faithfulness. John did what the Lord called him to do and he left the numbers up to God. And what was he called to do? What we see him doing back in 1:35 when he told two of his disciples, “Look, the Lamb of God!” And those two men, Andrew and John, left him and began to follow Jesus.

Right here is one of the hardest tests in a competitive age, the test of worldly success, and John passed it. Why? Because for John it wasn’t Jesus plus something. It was Jesus. He truly believed in Jesus.

May I ask you something? Do you believe in Jesus because of what Jesus gives you, or do you believe in Jesus because of Jesus? Or to put it another way, would heaven be heaven to you if Jesus weren’t there? If your answer is *yes*, you may not be going because the evidence of genuine faith is the desire to see Christ and to see Him exalted.

That’s scene one, the test of faith.

II. Scene two: We hear the testimony of faith (27-30).

In response to his test, John gave a clear testimony regarding three subjects.

A. John shares what he believes about God (27). “To this John replied, ‘A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.’”

Did you catch that? John believes in the sovereignty of God, and he says so. He sees God’s hand in everything. When the crowds come, that’s from God. When they leave and go to another, that’s from God too. When you’re given the ability to preach and people listen, that’s from God. When you lose your pulpit and your audience too, that’s also from God. You have only what has been *given to you from heaven*.

Is that how you view God, and talk about Him? Do you see your life as being in His hands, and your possessions and experiences and opportunities and setbacks as being from Him? That’s the testimony of faith.

B. John shares what he believes about himself (28-29). “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”

Notice what John said about himself, two things. First...

⁵ William Barclay, p. 142.

1. *He made it clear who he wasn't and who he was.* "I am not the Christ." There's no messianic complex with John. It's not his world, not his ministry, not his following, not his fame, not his agenda that matters. I am not the Christ. That's not who I am.

Then who are you, John? I am the one sent ahead of the Christ. That's me. I have the God-given assignment to prepare the way for the Messiah, and now that He's here I want you to go to Him.

I'm not the bridegroom. He is. I'm like the best-man at a wedding. My job is to make sure everything goes in a way that pleases the main attraction. That's not me. That's *Him*.

How prone we are to forget that. I appreciate Warren Wiersbe's assessment of something we're facing these days. He writes, "Often press releases and book reviews cross my desk, along with conference folders; and at times I am perturbed by what I read. Very few speakers and writers are ordinary people. They are 'world travelers' or 'noted lecturers' who have addressed 'huge audiences.' They are always in 'great demand,' and their ministries are described in such ways that they make the Apostle Paul a midget by comparison."⁶

We would do well to pay attention to John the Baptist, my friend. Our homes would be sweeter if we did. So would our places of employment, and our church. I am not the Christ. He is. And I love the second thing that John affirmed about himself that day...

2. *He made it clear that his joy was to make much of Christ.* Notice the end of verse 29 again, "That joy is mine." What joy? The joy of the bridegroom's friend when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That's my joy, says John. That's what I live for, to hear Christ's voice and know that others are now hearing it too.

That's beautiful, isn't it? What's John doing? He's making much of Christ, and why is he doing that? Because that's the testimony of a person who possesses genuine, saving faith.

One time a pastor in Melbourne, Australia introduced the famous missionary to China, J. Hudson Taylor, by using many exalting terms, including the adjective *great*. When Hudson Taylor stepped into the pulpit he quietly said, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master."⁷

That's the testimony of faith, my friend. There's no room for pride when you know you are a sinner saved by grace. *I am the chief of sinners*, said the man who wrote half of the New Testament.

Jesus Christ didn't come to save good people, but rebels. He went to the cross and sacrificed Himself to save sinners. Three days later He left the tomb alive, and today He offers the free gift of eternal life to all who will believe in Him. And here's what is true of all who do believe in Him. They know they don't deserve the gift, and more than that, they gladly admit it.

John gave clear testimony to a third subject that day. First, about God. Second, about himself. And third...

C. John shares what he believes about Christ (30). "He must become greater; I must become less."

⁶ Warren Wiersbe, p. 297.

⁷ Story told by Warren Wiersbe, p. 297.

Commentator Leon Morris refers to that sentence as “one of the greatest utterances that ever fell from human lips.”⁸ John puts the spotlight on God’s plan here. He *must* become greater. It’s inevitable in light of who He is and why He came. And if He must become greater, then I must become less. It must be so.

Wiersbe remarks that “must” is used in three significant ways in John 3. “There is the ‘must’ of the sinner (John 3:7), the ‘must’ of the Savior (John 3:14), and the ‘must’ of the servant (John 3:30).”⁹ He *must* become greater. I *must* become less.

Again, that’s the testimony of true faith. When a person truly believes in the Lord with Holy Spirit produced faith, that person will cherish the Lord and value Him and esteem Him as his greatest treasure.

Sadly, for many on church rolls today, Jesus is a token rather than a treasure.

You know what a token is. A token is what we used to get when we took our girls to Adventure Kingdom. They got excited about a token. They smiled when they got a token. Why? Because if they had a token, they could play the game and win prizes. And that’s what they really wanted, not the token but the prizes. And once they left Adventure Kingdom, there was no sadness about leaving the token behind, for it was just a means to something all along.

My friend, Jesus isn’t a token. He’s the treasure of all treasures!

When missionary, William Carey, was dying, he said to a friend, “When I am gone, don’t talk about William Carey; talk about William Carey’s Savior. I desire that Christ alone might be magnified.”¹⁰

We’ve seen the test of faith this morning, and we’ve heard the testimony of faith. Now let’s take inventory by asking ourselves two questions.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following...

1. *Does your faith pass the test?* Listen to this prophecy in Isaiah 28:5, “In that day the LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people.” Is that describing you? Is the Lord a glorious crown and beautiful wreath to you? If He is, then that’s evidence you’ve been born again and you possess a faith that’s real.

But He’s not a glorious crown to you, please be honest about it. I’ll say it again. There’s an eternal difference between merely *saying* you believe in the Lord and truly *believing* in Him. Does your faith pass the test?

Here’s the second question...

2. *Do you have a testimony that exalts Christ?* John could say, “He must become greater; I must become less.” And no one listening could argue with him about it, for it was true. That was his testimony. Is it ours?

What needs to change in our lives today so that our testimonies more clearly exalt the Christ we say we treasure?

⁸ Leon Morris, p. 242.

⁹ Warren Wiersbe, p. 298.

¹⁰ As told by Kent Hughes, p. 94.