

*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

*<sup>16</sup> “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.<sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.<sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.<sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.<sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” (John 3:14-21)*

### **What a Difference Faith Makes!**

What a difference a day makes. One day, you’re cruising along and everything is fine. But you feel a little twinge so you go see the doctor and he finds cancer. After that, your life is going to be very different. One day, you’re frustrated and worried because the job you had for years went away and you’ve been looking, but none of those little nibbles has turned into an offer yet. Then the phone rings and someone wants you to come back in and you realize this is going to be the one. Once you start working again, your life is going to change. There are so many events in our lives that make things different. There are so many choices we make and things we experience that could’ve gone another way and if they had, we might be very different people today. But the thing that makes the biggest difference in our lives is knowing Jesus. The faith God gave us is going to affect every day of our life here and every day of eternity. One day this week, a man who had been going through that unemployment challenge and is now working said, “I don’t know how people without faith get through things like that.” **What a difference faith makes!**

#### **I.**

But where we’re going to start today as we consider that difference might surprise you. We’re starting with God. **What a difference faith makes in how God views us.** God does have an opinion of every single one of us. Faith changes that view. God looks at believers and unbelievers differently. But when we say that, we have to understand a more basic truth. Faith does not change God’s love for us, at least not in this life. Today, we heard the most famous passage in the 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.”** Notice who God loved. Not just believers. Not just “good people.” Not just you and me. God loved the world. The very next verse says, **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** Three more times God says “the world.” He sent his Son into the world. The Son of God became a real human being and lived in this sinful world. But he didn’t come to condemn the world, that is the people of this world. He came to save the world. That’s how far God’s love extends. There is no person alive today that God does not love. God even loves those guys in Syria and Nigeria that are executing people just for being Christians. God even loves the atheists and the liberals in our country that attack everything that we say and do.

Because he loves us all he sent Jesus to die for us all. The reading started by saying, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”** When the children of Israel came up out of Egypt, they sinned. So God sent poisonous snakes among them and many died. But then God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and God promised that everyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the pole and they would live. If they trusted God enough to do that, they were freed from his punishment. Jesus would be lifted up on a pole. We call it the cross. God lifted Jesus up so that we would be freed from God’s punishment. How did that work? Well, on that cross, Jesus paid for all the sin of all the world. Jesus died for those fanatics in Syria and Nigeria and for those atheists and liberals in America. Jesus died for every sinner who will ever be born. He died for you and me. That’s how much God loved us all.

Trust in what Jesus did for us – faith – changes how God views us. Because God is a God of justice, in the end, he will punish sin. Judgment Day is coming on the world, just as God’s judgment fell on the people of

Israel in the desert. On that day, God will finally take his love away from sinners. But God wants us all to live, so he sent his Son to die and rise to give us eternal life. God said, **“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”** That’s the difference. Jesus died for everyone. But some people insist on trusting in themselves. Some people insist on telling God that they’re good people and God should let them into heaven. So God says, “OK. I’ll judge you by what you have done and said and thought and felt.” Guess what? He finds all their sin and he condemns it. Everyone who denies Jesus is already condemned to hell.

But God has given us faith so we are not condemned. My friends, the verdict is already in. We don’t have to wait until Judgment Day to find out what God is going to say. If you’re on trial for a crime and you could spend years in prison, waiting while that jury decides your fate must be a horrible thing. You and I don’t have to wait. We have no suspense or anxiety. God has already told us what the verdict is: not guilty because of Christ. Not guilty because of our faith in him.

That is a miracle because all the evidence is against us. We are sinners. Now, I rarely have people come to me for comfort just because they’re sinners. They come because of what they said to the parents or what they did to their spouse. Some specific sin torments them. And those sins are real and deserve God’s punishment. But the truth is, we are thoroughly sinful. Every fiber of our existence is contaminated by sin and God condemns us for what we are every bit as much as he condemns us for what we do. But in Christ, we are no longer sinners. In Christ, we no longer sin. God sees us as perfect and his verdict is not guilty. Not guilty now, while we live here. Not guilty on the day we die, so we go to heaven. Not guilty on Judgment Day, so we will rise and live in a perfect world for all eternity. The faith God gave us makes him see us that way.

## II.

So the biggest difference that faith makes is really outside of us. It’s a difference in how God sees us. That’s true, even though God gave us that faith. But we shouldn’t walk away today thinking that faith doesn’t do anything inside of us. It does. It works a fundamental change inside us, a change that can be seen in our lives. **What a difference faith makes in how we live.**

Our reading says, **“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”** Our deeds are evil. That’s true even about us believers, because we all have a sinful nature. We’re born with it. It’s the reason why we sin. The sinner inside us hates all the things God calls us to do: go to church, be generous with other people, think about others instead of ourselves, bring a generous offering, put God first in our lives. Our sinful nature wants to party and live for me and indulge every desire I have, whether God likes it or not. That’s the way we were born. But faith makes us different. When God gave us faith, he gave us a new man, a believer who lives inside us and fights against that old man. That new man is our true self.

But not everyone has a new man. So Jesus says that everyone who loves evil hates the light of the gospel. No one who lives in sin wants to compare his life to what Jesus says. If you’re an unbeliever, you insist on believing that you’re a good person. You flee from Christ because you cannot stand up to his standard of holiness. You make excuses for sin, “Everybody does it.” You compare yourself to child molesters and mass murderers and say, “See, I’m not like that.” If you’re an unbeliever, you make sin into a joke and you revel in the bad boy image because everybody loves a rebel. At the same time, you don’t want to hear about forgiveness, because that would be admitting that you had done wrong.

But everyone who lives by the truth lives in the light. We’re not like the world around us anymore. We love the Lord. We want to hear what he has to say. The new man inside us even makes us willing to come to church and hear about sin so that we can examine ourselves and repent. If Christ has given you faith, you don’t need to pass off your sins with jokes. You don’t need to make excuses or compare yourself to others. You can face your sin because you know that in the end you are forgiven. That attitude is totally different from the world around us.

Living in the light enables you to strive to live for Christ. Seeing our own sin and seeing the love of Christ who died and rose and took that sin away is the best motivation for a life of repentance. I don’t change my life because I think that being good gets me into heaven. I don’t change my life because people will respect me more or like me more. I change my life because my God and Savior left heaven behind and he died and he rose and he washed all my sins away and I just want to say thank you. I change my life because the light of

Christ has come into this world and it found me. I didn't deserve it. I was no better than any sinner who will spend eternity in hell. But God loved me and he found me and he made me his.

The text says, **“But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”** This is the biggest difference of all: God has changed me. God gave me that new man. And God keeps working in my heart today and every day. Now, God does expect that we believers will strive to live for him. But we would never accomplish anything without the gospel working in our hearts and changing us, so it is really God who works in us. Every sermon I ever preach is God's work. Any blessing that ever comes to your life through my ministry is God working. Every blessing that you are to each other, every moment of thoughtfulness and love, every example of faith that your children will remember about you and learn from – all that is God working in you. God is working in you because he gave you faith. That faith hears his gospel and rejoices in it and works for Jesus.

That of course, reminds us of the other big change in us: our attitude. God sent his Son so that we who believe may have eternal life. It is ours. No matter how bad life gets here, we know that we are going home to a new and better life, a life that will last so much longer than our brief time here. If our God loved us and gave us his Son to give us that life, he promises to hear and answer our prayers. He promises to take care of us here. He promises to encourage us and bless us beyond our ability to even understand it all. And he does all that through the gospel that promises us life with him. When life hurts, God points us to heaven and then he works in our hearts to give us strength and courage and even joy.

We are different now. We are no longer lost and condemned sinners. We belong to Jesus. At some point in your life, God came to through the gospel and claimed you. Do you remember the moment? Some of you probably do. You were wrestling and God sent someone to tell you about Jesus. Or there was a day when the gospel came into your life. You never saw it coming until it arrived and changed you. Many of us, however, don't remember the day the change came. We were baptized as babies. That's true for me. All our lives we've known our Savior. So we didn't have that dramatic moment of change. We can't compare the before and after the way you can if you remember a time when you didn't have faith. So sometimes, the difference isn't as clear to us. But stop for a moment and try to imagine how different your life would be without Jesus. How many hurts would have broken you? How much fear would have possessed you? How many different choices would you have made and what would've been the consequences? Finally, only God can know. But I think that most of us lifelong believers can at least imagine how different our lives would have been without Jesus. All of us have him now. What a difference faith in him makes for this life and for the life to come. Amen.