John 3:17-18 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 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.

Yep, you heard that famous passage of God’s Word, didn’t you? I don’t know if it is the most popular, because I think the words of Psalm 23 are right up there with this passage that almost everyone knows. Yet, we have to admit that John 3:16 is pretty well known. Well known especially as the very epitome of what the Gospel message is all about. You know that verse: **“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.”**

And honestly, that is a great passage to help us grasp the intent and wonder of the gospel. To just grasp that God’s love was so great that he sent Jesus to take on human flesh and blood, to take upon himself the condemnation for all of our sins is a wonderful thing to hear. And not only does this passage lead us to contemplate what Jesus has done but it is a passage that causes us to pause and also contemplate what all of this was about, namely, that we have the gift of eternal life.

Yet I fear that too many don’t really pay attention to the details. The other day in our Wednesday Bible Class we were covering Hebrews 2. Verse 1 says this: **“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”** Simple encouragement isn’t it? Pay attention. Pay attention closely. All too often I fear that people don’t pay attention to the details. They only hear what they want to hear or only believe what they want to believe rather than to pay close attention to what the Lord has taught.

I remember back in grade school, it might have been 5th grade, when the teacher announced that day that we were going to take a special surprise quiz. She passed it out upside down all the while telling us to be careful to follow every direction closely and she must have repeated that phrase a dozen times: every direction closely! Once all the papers were passed out, she told us we have 15 minutes to get this quiz done. Ready, start!

Man I turned that paper over and started looking at it. The very first line said, “Carefully follow each and every instruction. Do not do anything until you have read through the whole set of instructions! Be careful and follow every instruction exactly!” I wanted to do my best. And since the whole paper was filled with about 30 lines of instruction, I wanted to make sure that I got everything right. The very next instruction said, “Please write your name in the upper right hand portion of this sheet.” In my best penmanship I wrote my name. Next instruction: “Carefully draw a small square in the upper right hand corner, right behind your name.” I thought that was weird, but I drew that square. From there that whole paper was filled with all kinds of quirky and well, dumb instructions like that. A squiggly line here, a circle there, a circle over the circle, arrows in every corner and so on. Until you got to the 29th instruction. It read: “Please note the first instruction was to not do anything until you had read through the entire list. At this point put your pencil down and go to the next instruction. #30: “This quiz was to see how well you can follow instructions…All of them…carefully! At the teacher’s request, pass your unmarked paper back to her!”

My paper was all marked up! Not a clean place anywhere. My first inclination was to begin erasing furiously, but as I started that I realized that it was clear I had not followed all the instructions carefully first. My only defense is that only about 2 of my classmates actually followed the instructions. I was thoroughly embarrassed but as the teacher collected those papers she lectured us on the importance of paying attention, careful attention to everything. That may have been the beginning of my theological training. Because paying attention to detail is so important.

So does John 3:16 say you can do anything you want and that you will be saved? Does John 3:16 mean that since God loves us and has sent his Son therefore this gift of eternal life is a free for all, everyone is going to get in, everyone, regardless of race, social status or creed is automatically in because of Jesus? Well here is a bit of news. It is true that God pays no attention to race or social status, but God has drawn a very clear line as to who gets in and who doesn’t! God does care about your creed, your religion, what you believe in! That line is found in the word, actually a verb: “believe.” The text itself actually reads, “Because everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” There it is! There is God’s line drawn for us. Faith is the key. And just to make sure we grasp what this is all about, let’s turn our attention to the verses before us because those verses basically explain the point of God’s line. Our theme: **UNDERSTANDING FAITH.**

Now just what do you suppose is the reason that God, actually Jesus, gave us these words? Jesus shared these words to speak to us about what His work is about. Remember how the opening words of this section told us about the snake in the desert lifted up on a pole? That snake was a shadow of the Christ. The Israelites were surrounded and being killed by poisonous snakes because of great sin and when the people finally realized that their only hope was to turn to God they did. God’s response was that a bronze snake was to be made, put on a pole and that everyone bitten who looked at the snake would live. Nothing in the people. Nothing in the bronze snake could cause this. It worked because God said it would. It worked because of the power and promise of God and nothing else. Well, welcome to the truth of Jesus. Why do you think Jesus used that reference of the bronze snake to introduce these words?

Because following that introduction is John 3:16! Our focus is to be Jesus! God’s Son sent to save. Not how well we look at Jesus, not how much we love God, not anything to do with us but believe, because God said so. Just like the snake in the wilderness. We need to grasp that all of us are bitten, bitten by the serpent and filled with the poison of sin. We need Jesus. Then comes verse 17, **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”**

When you read those words if you don’t immediately grasp the intent and purpose of God for your salvation and eternal life, you have missed the lesson. Here is a verse telling us the whole point of Jesus…to save the world. To rescue us from sin, death and the devil.

That rescuing is done by faith. To help you understand that just contemplate the verses of our Epistle reading and ask yourself just how many times believing or its equivalent is mentioned? Verse 15, **“everyone who believes.”** Verse 16, **“whoever believes.”** Verse 18, **“whoever believes.”**  Verse 21, **“whoever lives by the truth.”** Now those are the positive ways of expressing this, don’t forget the negative ways. Verse 18, **“whoever does not believe stands condemned.”** Verse 19, **“men loved darkness instead of light.”** Verse 20, **“Everyone who does evil hates the light.”**

Do you get the feeling that this whole section is about faith? About faith in Jesus! About trusting what God has done and revealed and sealed in Jesus! Nowhere in this verse do you find a get out of jail free card. Nowhere do you hear that it doesn’t matter what you believe just so you believe something idea. Nowhere is there found the idea that sin is of no account or that God’s love is an automatic pass for getting into heaven. But everywhere you look in this section it is clear that Jesus and faith in Jesus is the crux and heart of the matter.

Please note that what verse 17 said is true, Jesus did not come to condemn the world! He didn’t have to! That’s because the world was and is condemned already. The Law of God reveals the condemnation because of the sin and disobedience of the world. That’s why verse 18 tells us, **“whoever does not believe stands condemned already.”** This world, ever since the fall into sin has the problem of condemnation. Now, God wanted to do something about that condemnation and what He did is found in Jesus, realized in Jesus and given in Jesus. The moment you determine that Jesus is nothing, that this fairy tale about Jesus is worthless and foolish, that you will not believe, then you will get to remain in your natural state: you can continue to be condemned. You can continue to die to God and then to die for all eternity. Or like the Israelites you can refuse to look at the bronze snake and die, because without the bronze snake with the promise and power of God behind it, you are going to die anyway. It is true, Jesus did not come to condemn the world.

He came to save and rescue the world from the condemnation that was already ours! How? Because Jesus has been lifted up in our wilderness. Jesus has been put on the cross and by faith in Him, faith given and granted by God, the poison of sin is of no effect. That is the substitutionary and redemptive purpose of Jesus. To end our condemnation by being condemnation for us. To grant us eternal life and salvation because of God’s grace expressed in his kindness to us in Jesus. So please note that this section makes it amply clear that Jesus and faith in Jesus is an absolute necessity for being a part of this eternal life of Jesus.

So consider a few of the other passages here and their implication. Verse 18, **“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.”** To me that seems pretty clear. Faith in Jesus saves and lack of faith brings to you the natural condemnation that is ours because of the problem of sin. But what I really like is that last little phrase: **“Because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”**

You don’t believe Jesus is God’s Son? You don’t believe Jesus is the complete revelation and truth of God? You don’t believe Jesus is the Word, the Word that was with God and that was an intimate part of the Creation of God. The Word that is the truth and saves! You don’t believe that Jesus is the Lord of lords, the King of kings and that His Word and His Bible is the very standard of judgment upon which you will stand or fall? Because if you are going to talk about faith, then that faith clearly needs to grasp and understand that Jesus is God’s one and only Son and the only means of salvation that God has given us. You need to believe in Jesus’ name and all that this wondrous and eternal name of God’s Son carries, implies and reveals. That is what God is looking for when it comes to faith.

Or consider verses 19-21: **“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 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.”** Again I think the lesson here is simple, but the world today, totally and absolutely rejects the truth found here.

The world does not consider the Bible and Jesus the Light of truth. The world does not accept and acknowledge the issue of evil and the horror of evil deeds. The world rejects all of this because it knows that to accept the light, to believe the truth of God is to expose their evil deeds and ideas. And each of us here needs to grasp that the world’s ideas and philosophies are in many cases dangerous and devastating to our souls. To accept the world, to love the world, to walk the world’s ways is dangerous.

And notice the implications of the last line. When we live by the light, we have the truth, the truth of God. When we live by the light, that doesn’t mean we are free from sin or that we never sin again. Rather it means that we acknowledge the struggle of sin, the horror of evil, the lure of the world and because of the gift of faith we have in Jesus we fight those things. We may falter, stumble, or even do evil, but always, with Jesus and His Light, we come to see our sin, repent of that sin and cling to the hope of Jesus to forgive that sin. Now you understand what that phrase means: **“it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”** We are in faith, humble, repentant, and rescued by Jesus and his love. That is the impact and marvel of faith in our lives.

Dear people, I absolutely believe and teach that we are saved by grace through faith. That faith is the gift of God. God has put Jesus on the cross for us. God has taken care of the poison of sin and the threat of death. God has promised that in Jesus, through Jesus, by Jesus we have the forgiveness of sin and thus we have the wonder of eternal life. Hear this truth. Believe this truth. Amen.