

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S "A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"

Seventh Sunday of Easter God's Testimony May 24, 2009

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1 John 5:9-13

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. 10 Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Today is our final week looking at the First Letter of John. Last week Chris Hancock, our guest preacher, reminded us that John wrote this letter to Christians who had been influenced by false teaching about who Jesus really was. Chris told us that the true teaching about Jesus has three characteristics. It is truly inclusive because anyone who repents of their sin and come to Christ is included. It produces obedience to God out of gratitude for his unfathomable love in sending his Son to suffer and die for our salvation, and third, it is ultimately victorious over the suffering and evil of this world because Jesus Christ has overcome them in his death and resurrection.

In today's reading, John uses the concept of testimony to summarize what he has been saying throughout his letter. Testimony is simply what someone says about something. We hear testimony all the time in advertising. We hear reviews of products from satisfied customers, or endorsements of products from

professional athletes or celebrities. Endorsements are really a testimony. The endorser is giving the testimony, “I use this product and it’s great!” Endorsements sell products. Nike, for example, has paid Tiger Woods over \$100 million to wear their logo, and the result is that Nike has built up the leading golf apparel business in the world around him, as well as one of the leading golf equipment companies. Nike has had phenomenal success tying themselves to Tiger Woods’ testimony because Tiger Woods is phenomenally good at playing golf. Building a product line around a lesser golfer’s testimony wouldn’t have the same results.

That’s what John is saying when he builds his summary around God’s testimony as compared to man’s testimony: **“We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.”** John is pointing out that while human beings are good at many things, one area in which they have no ability is salvation. Human beings cannot save themselves. They can’t engineer an eternal existence for themselves in this universe. God on the other hand, created the universe through Christ. That’s why he and he alone can save us. And the testimony he gives us that he can and will save us is a person, his Son Jesus Christ. The false teaching John is correcting held that Jesus was somehow spiritual, not physical. He was too holy and spiritual to have had to go through the humiliating brutality of a degrading crucifixion for sin. For the false teachers, Jesus was a beautiful spirit or word of wisdom who affirmed their intellectually satisfying view of life. Sin just wasn’t a problem for them.

But John will have none of that. In the first verse of his letter he maintains that the word of life became a human being and that he and the other apostles saw him and handled him with their hands. God’s love in Christ is self-giving and painful, but it saves us. As we heard two weeks ago in 1 John 4:10, **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**

In today’s reading, John says that God has given us his testimony and that John and his readers have God’s testimony “in their hearts”. Verse 10: **“Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart.”** I’d like to look at this statement more closely because I think the way we 21st-century Americans think may keep us from really understanding what John means here. First, what does it mean to “believe in the Son of God”? Does it mean standing up to recite the Apostles’ or the Nicene Creed? Does it mean to identify Jesus as the Son of God, a man who lived in the first century in Palestine, and died on a cross under the Roman Empire? Is believing in the Son of God a matter of “believing beliefs” about him? No. It’s a matter not only of understanding the facts about who Jesus is, but of trusting in him and him alone for my salvation. Let me illustrate.

Many of you may have seen or even be fans of the thriller TV series “24”. Kiefer Sutherland plays Jack Bauer, a special agent with the government’s counter-terrorism force. Jack Bauer is always getting himself into situations where he is the only one who can obtain the evidence, or defuse the bomb, or spoil the plot that will prevent some catastrophic terrorist attack. And because the counter-terrorism unit has been infiltrated by enemies, someone always suspects Jack Bauer is up to no good. Their suspicions are magnified because often Jack Bauer’s plans involve what seem to be outrageous measures. For example, in one episode, Jack Bauer has to call the President, who’s giving a speech in Los Angeles, and ask him to order the city evacuated because terrorists are planning to detonate a nuclear device and kill hundreds of thousands of people. If anyone else made that call, they’d be locked up as a crank. But because the President knows it’s Jack Bauer, he takes the call. Because he trusts Jack Bauer, he believes the danger is real. He evacuates Los Angeles. Disaster is averted. Every episode has a different plot, but the basic premise is always the same: if you just trust Jack Bauer, everything will be OK.

That’s what believing in the Son of God is. It’s trusting Jesus Christ for salvation—to avert the disaster of not believing the testimony of the God who created the universe and who can alone save us: Jesus, the Son of God, is the Word of God through whom the universe and all that is in it was made. He alone can save us. That’s believing. It’s trusting.

Second, trusting has to do with our heart. We tend to think of “the heart” as the emotional part of us, the place where we have tender feelings. So when we think of having God’s **“testimony in our heart,”** we naturally think of feelings: peace, joy, love, and so forth. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not complete.

For John and his readers, “the heart” is our inner selves—our minds and our spirits, as well as our emotions. The heart is the center of who we are. It’s the part of us that runs everything else about us. What’s in our hearts—our minds and thoughts, our attitudes towards ourselves and one another and towards God—determines who we are and what we do. Trusting in Jesus Christ for my salvation means that I have believed God’s testimony. I believe that I need salvation, that my sin has put me into clear and present eternal danger. I believe that God and God alone is uniquely able to save me. That is what God says in Jesus Christ. Having this testimony in my heart means that my whole being and life is based on my trust in him. “Believing in the Son of God” is trusting not in some amazingly talented superhero, but in the architect of the universe himself, who became a human being to restore me to be who he designed me to be.

And unfortunately, the reverse is true. If I trust in myself, or in anyone or anything other than the Son of God, I don't have life, as John says in verse 12: **“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”** Trusting the testimony of bishops or priests, or theologians or my education or anyone but God in Christ about my situation leads to disastrous results.

Human beings tend to have two competing versions of our situation. The first is that through scientific progress and the explosion of knowledge about the brain, subatomic particles, and so forth, human beings are evolving towards perfection. This is basically the same false teaching John was correcting in the first century. It's based on our need to escape suffering and unpleasantness through knowledge. It denies the concrete realities of pain and death in this world by claiming that we can overcome them by gaining knowledge. This is the philosophical dimension of this view of our situation, but we can see it in everyday life in people who claim to have “grown” beyond where their spouse is, and need a divorce, who are constantly looking for some new relationship, or hobby, or experience. They are really simply escaping the reality of love and commitment that involves sacrifice. They are escaping from the eternal life of Jesus, which he gives us as we give of ourselves for others as he gave himself for us.

The second version has to do not with changing ourselves, but of changing the world through human potential and progress, to run the planet and our cultures at maximum efficiency. Human achievement in this world is the goal, and can be realized by human effort and ability. This version is based on our hopeless self-centeredness. It sees ourselves as the center and the goal of everything. You can see this as the philosophy behind a lot of business and industry, but it's in human relationship as well. People treat other people as mechanisms to get the job done. People drive themselves and parents drive their children to achieve, to excel, to do better. Legitimate human needs are neglected in favor of meeting goals. Neither of these views accept God's testimony that we are in eternal danger, and that only trusting Christ can save us from it.

Accepting the testimony of God is a matter of our hearts. It means accepting God's version of our situation instead of our own. God's testimony is that he created human beings to shine out his perfect beauty, purity, creativity and self-giving love. He created us to live by depending on him for all of our life. We have broken that relationship by trying to go our own way. But in his mercy, he

gave us his Son, a human being like us. Jesus lived for us and died for us, “**an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**” When we receive God’s testimony, we can say with John, “**And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.**”

Let us pray.