

"Does It Really Matter?"

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John 3:16 is probably the best known verse in the entire Bible. I think it's safe to say that most Christians know it by heart and maybe even most non-Christians in this country as well, especially with Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow on the scene.

During yesterday's game between the Broncos and the New England Patriots, *Focus on the Family*, based in Colorado Springs, ran a 30-second commercial featuring children reciting John 3:16, Tebow's favorite verse. They got the idea because of the interest generated after last week's game against the Steelers. It turned out that Tebow passed the ball for a record 316 yards during the game, with an average of 31.6 yards per pass.

Some people thought the numbers were more than just a coincidence and decided to search on the internet for John 3:16. Lots of people, actually. *Focus on the Family* president Jim Daly said, "It just hit us when there were something like 100 million Google searches on it: 'Why not make it easy for people? Why make people get off the couch during the game to look for it?'"

But our familiarity with this verse means we can often miss its message. It just sort of rolls off the tongue and we don't even think about it. So this morning we are looking at John 3:16 - and the other 20 verses that put it in context - in order to introduce a new sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, which is also so familiar to most of us that we don't think about it.

Almost every Sunday we stand and recite the Apostles' Creed. Why? It was written 2000 years ago. Does it really matter? Is it just a relic from long ago that we recite out of tradition or could it still be important for our faith today? From now until Easter we will look at the Creed and discover that it can help us grow in our knowledge of Scripture and therefore in our knowledge of God himself.

First, a little background on the Apostles' Creed. The basic outline of the creed dates all the way back to first century Rome. It was originally taught to new converts to Christianity who were preparing for baptism. The church at the time only performed baptisms at sunrise on Easter Sunday, which is how the tradition of Easter sunrise services started.

Before being baptized, these new converts would spend a period of time being taught the basics of the Christian faith using the creed. Today one of the benefits of learning and studying the Apostles' Creed is that it connects us to the basic, most important elements of faith and life. Despite the ever-changing society we live in, the Christian faith is not ours to redefine. The creed provides us with a brief summary of the essentials that Christians everywhere have always believed. And that's where we want to start today.

In our passage from John chapter 3, there is one word that is repeated over and over again: "believe." Verse 15: "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Verse 16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that

whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Verse 18 mentions believing in both the positive and negative: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

So the Apostles' Creed begins, "I believe..." This morning we want to explore what we mean when we say "I believe." In the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, belief and faith are very closely related. In fact, it's the same word in Greek, from a root word meaning trusting or worthy of trust. One scholar said, "It's a shame in English we can't say 'I faith in God' as you can in Greek or German." His point is that our English word "believe" has a mental or theoretical connotation.

John Baillie, who wrote the devotional classic *A Diary of Private Prayer*, said it was the difference between believing from the top of the mind, which is knowledge, and believing from the bottom of the heart, which is faith.

Nicodemus was apparently a very high ranking Jewish official, probably a member of the Sanhedrin. You could compare that position a modern-day U.S. Senator. He pays Jesus a visit and the Bible says he came at night, most likely so that no one would see him. He also came with some knowledge. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Nicodemus and the others that he was representing on this visit had knowledge about Jesus. But they didn't have faith.

Jesus, of course, knows this. John 2:25 says that Jesus knows what is in man. He knows

Nicodemus' thoughts and so he gets right to the point of saying that Nicodemus needs faith. He needs to be "born again" by the Holy Spirit. You see, faith - belief - is ultimately a work of God in our life. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, belief is impossible.

At this point I want to look at the first phrase in the creed, "I believe in God," and I want to focus on the word "believe." I believe in God. At the most basic, believing means that we **assent** to something. The first part of believing is assent. When we say, "I believe" we are saying that we agree that something is true. When we say "I believe," we are agreeing to the truths contained in the Apostles' Creed.

But faith also means assenting to truths that are not proven. As Hebrews 11 says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we say "I believe in God," we are saying that God exists even though we can't see or touch Him directly. In Mark 9, the father of an epileptic boy brings his son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus tells him that anything is possible if he will believe. The man cries out, "I believe, help my unbelief." That's biblical faith. The man had enough faith to recognize his unbelief and to worship Jesus in spite of it. And Jesus met him there and healed his son. It's the same for us. We don't have all the answers. But in faith we worship God anyway. We come to Jesus and say, "I believe; help my unbelief."

The second thing I want us to see from this statement is that we believe *in God*. There must be an object of our faith. Everybody has some kind of faith - whether it's faith that your

car will start, or faith that gravity will still work when you wake up. The question is where you put your faith. We're not simply saying we believe that God exists. As Jesus says, even the demons believe God exists. What we believe is deeper than that. Faith goes beyond intellectual belief or assent to an *attitude*, an attitude of trust. Remember that the Greek word in the Bible for faith or belief comes from a root meaning trust. Our relationship with God is based entirely on trust. We believe *in* God. In other words, we trust our very lives to God by surrendering to His will. We trust that His promises are true and that He is faithful to keep those promises.

So we've looked at *assent*, and *attitude*. The third thing I want us to see is *action*. Our beliefs determine our actions. In other words, we do what we believe in. Faith precedes actions. If you believe it's going to rain, you bring an umbrella with you. If you believe the world financial markets are going to collapse, you put all your money in gold. If you believe Jesus is the one and only Son of God and trust Him as your Lord and Savior, you join the church.

This is the personal part of faith. *I* believe in God. You and I can acquire a vast amount of knowledge *about* Jesus, but at some point to be a Christian each of us will have to say, "*I* believe." At that moment, the faith becomes our own. It's no longer our parents' or grandparents' faith. There comes a time for action. That's what verse 21 of our passage from John 3 means. "Whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." If you are a follower of Jesus, it will show

in your life, because God is working inside you.

To help us put our assent and attitude into action, we are going to memorize some verses together over the coming weeks. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." You will

notice on the bottom of your
bulletin that the first memory
verse is listed there. Let's say
it out loud together.

*For with the heart one
believes and is justified, and
with the mouth one confesses and
is saved. - Romans 10:10*

So the next time we stand and
recite the Apostles' Creed, ask
yourself, "Do I really believe
that what I believe is really
real?"

Amen.