

Unfailing Love for a Rebellious World

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[0 : 00] The World Cup is on. I have to confess that at first I was going to cheer for the Australian team.

That's not only because we have at least three Australians who attend this church, but who couldn't cheer for a team called the Socceroos? I mean, only the Australians would think of a name which is just so sort of both endearing and ridiculous at the same time.

I think it's part of their culture to like stuff like that. And so I was going to cheer for the Socceroos and probably England, but I met Victor from our 11 o'clock service at a funeral this week, and he said, George, George, George, you should be cheering for Brazil.

And he said that because he said Brazil's going to win, and if you cheer for Brazil, you'll end up being happy, and you'll be able to just sort of watch them go from victory to victory.

But then I was thinking after talking to him, maybe I would just cheer for the different teams that, you know, like parishioners have come from different countries to be here, and maybe I would just choose cheer for those teams.

[1 : 15] And then as I was thinking about that and thinking about John 3.16, if I've forgotten somebody, please forgive me, but here's a list of countries, people who come to this church, either have come here as immigrants from these countries, or are first-generation Canadians.

Their parents have come from these countries. Listen to the different range of people who come to this church. We have people in this church from Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Canada, Kenya, Ojibwe First Nation people, Poland, Ukraine, Ireland, both South and North, Italy, Egypt, Australia, England, Philippines, China, Czech Republic, Malaysia.

I'm going to include Newfoundland, because Bob was born before Newfoundland joined Confederation. So Newfoundland, if you're older than... When did Newfoundland join? 49.

So if you're here from Newfoundland and you were born before 1949, you're included in that category of the nations. Bermuda, Barbados, Sierra Leone, Lebanon, Korea, the United States of America, Netherlands, Greece, and Anglophone and Francophone Canadians.

Isn't that amazing? And, you know, that's... It's really a testimony to the wonder of John 3.16, which is the gospel text which we began with today.

[2 : 50] 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. God gave his son for the world.

And, you know, the wonderful thing is that God has no grandchildren. He just has children. And God doesn't... You know, if one of us have come from a long line of godly parents, or if one of us have come from a long line of completely and utterly ungodly parents, or if we've come from a long line of Buddhists or pagans or Hindus or Muslims, the fact of the matter is for every single one of us, there is one saviour and his name is Jesus.

And we have been invited to come to him in faith. And God does not sort of look more kindly on those who come from Anglican backgrounds and less kindly on those who come from maybe Buddhist backgrounds.

He looks at the entire world and he says, this world needs a saviour and I have sent my son. And I hope that these men and women on the planet Earth will say yes to Jesus.

And our church, in a sense, is a testimony to how the gospel has gone throughout the world. Now, I could just end right now and it would be a very Canadian moment.

[4 : 10] And it would be sort of not much different than just a nice multicultural message. And we could all feel really good about the cultural smorgasbord. We could look forward to a multicultural buffet or something at some time we have a potluck.

But in fact, the text is hard for us today. The gospel text is hard for us today because it is profoundly un-Canadian. And it is because the text is so profoundly un-Canadian that as we approach the text, our mind wants to either start to turn off and just sort of glide through or it wants to just sort of, it rebels or chafes against the text because the text challenges fundamental things about how we as Canadians think.

And so much in this would be considered problem texts. Turn with me in your Bibles to page 920. And once again, I'm going to be reading from a fairly accurate version of the Bible.

I don't want to undermine your confidence in the Bible. You know, you can read all of the versions of the Bible that are sold in the main Christian bookstores. They will all give you the basic story.

But as you know, sometimes when you get down to very, very specific words, some translations are stronger than others and just really protecting the accuracy of the Greek text.

[5 : 35] And it's why I'm doing something a bit unusual today and reading from a slightly more accurate version because there's a couple of nuances in the text which this more accurate version brings out and might be missed in your version.

So John 3.16, we'll start reading there, page 920, and I'm reading from the TNIV version. 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.

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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

I just sort of want to pause there. You know, one of the things which is, verse 17, listen to that again, for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.

One of the things which underlies this text, this text of scripture, is that the Bible is telling us that the world is not neutral and that the world is not good but that in effect the people who make up the world, they're neither neutral or good, that the people who make up the world, that we are rebels against the true God and that we, in a sense, deserve God's wrath and judgment.

[7 : 06] It's a very, very un-Canadian way of looking at the text. For many of us as Canadians, maybe we would see that the world, all of the people in the world, that they're sort of somehow neutral and maybe then, because the world is sort of neutral, maybe we want to say that Jesus has to sort of fit into this neutral world and just sort of become a bit of a, maybe a bit of a guide to us because the world is a bit of good and a bit of evil and overall unbalance.

Well, we might, on a good day, think overall unbalance, it's good and overall unbalance, it's a bad, you know, depending on how we're feeling. But that, we just sort of see the world as basically neutral, the people in the world as neutral.

And so all of this talk of needing a saviour and condemning, it just sounds like it's so completely and utterly foreign and odd. And in fact, fundamentally, I think for most Canadians, at least most educated Canadians, the fundamental understanding of the people of the world is that the people of the world are basically good.

The world is evolving. Technology is evolving. We're going to solve, we're going to eventually solve cancer. We're going to eventually solve AIDS. We're going to eventually solve pollution. We'll even eventually, maybe not be able to have people live forever, but be able to have people live for a very, very long time.

And eventually, we'll be able to deal with poverty. And, you know, just as problem after problem comes, it's just obvious that just as science and technology is developing and evolving, we as a human race are developing and evolving.

[8 : 37] And so if Jesus has any place at all in this world, it really is that he has to come to add some value. He has to come to add value. It's sort of a little bit like, not that David is Jesus, but David Alexander coming to our church.

And, you know, we can say, well, our church has been developing and developing and developing, and some good things have been happening in our church. And the really wonderful thing about having David Alexander come on staff is that now he can add some value to our church.

And he's going to be able to come alongside us and help us with a whole pile of ministries and community building and help us to follow Jesus. And in some ways, for the average Canadian, they think of the world as somehow progressing like this so that if Jesus is to have any place in the world, it has to be something that he does which adds a little bit of value or maybe a lot of value to a project that's already going pretty good.

And in the midst of this, we have chapter 3, verse 17, which says something quite different. 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. Even before Christ, they stood condemned. Because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

[9 : 57] In other words, because they haven't believed in God's one and only Son, they can't escape the condemnation, the being condemned, which exists even before Jesus came to the world.

See, the text implies that we as a human race are rebels, that we have rebelled against God. And this rebellion doesn't just refer to street people or the people who are wildly profligate in some way.

It includes middle-class Canadians. It includes professors and politicians, successful business people, doctors and lawyers, people who live in perfect houses with perfect lawns, with perfect families, are just as much rebels and need the gospel as the worst street person we'll see on Rideau Street if we go down Rideau Street today.

So, I mean, this is a profoundly un-Canadian text, but that's what the text is saying. In fact, the text is telling us not that the world is so fantastic that God just wanted to send his Son to add some value, but that God is so fantastic and so unfailingly merciful that when we rebelled and when we continue in our rebellion, that God's response to that was not instantly just to cut us off and to execute, so to speak, judgment against us, but that in looking at the tragic situation of the human race and our powerlessness to be anything other than rebels, out of love for you and me, out of an unfailing love of Almighty God, he sends his very Son, Jesus, to save us.

That's the message of the gospel. You know, one of the things which distinguishes liberal Christians from Orthodox Christians, and I'm not making this up.

[11 : 50] Many of them maybe won't articulate it so plainly and clearly as this, but liberal Christians believe that the world sets the agenda for the church. That would be a theological motto or slogan for theological liberals.

The world sets the agenda for the church. And Orthodox Christians would say, the world is rebel. The world is a rebellious place.

And the gospel sets the agenda for the church. That the gospel is what needs to be spoken and proclaimed to the world. Now, let's just continue reading at verse 19 and following.

Here's what the text goes on to say a little bit more about this rebellion. Verse 19, this is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Let's sort of pause there for a second. One of my favorite shows is Law & Order, the original Law & Order show. And if you've watched that Law & Order show, I know it's a formula. It always sort of follows the same thing.

[12 : 55] It begins with them finding a body. And then the question is, the first half hour is consumed with the question, who might the guilty one be? And so the police follow all of these different leads to try to figure out who the guilty person might possibly be.

And then the question becomes, and early on in that first half hour, the question comes as they start to suspect who the guilty person will be from maybe a quarter of the way into the show until right until the end, the question will always be, can the case be made?

Can they collect evidence that can be administered in court? And will the lawyers be able to keep that evidence in court? And will they be able to show the jury that in fact this is good evidence?

And that becomes the dram of the show. And then one of the things about Law & Order is that most weeks, the guilty person is found guilty. But if it was always, if they were always found guilty, the show would be a little bit less interesting.

So you know that some weeks, the guilty people are going to get away. And so there's always this little bit of a question, will the jury accept the verdict, accept the evidence, and will they declare the person guilty or set them free?

[14 : 09] And in Canada, the Bible says here that God's verdict against the human race has already been set.

In other words, to be a human being isn't like Law & Order. It isn't as if, you know, we're going through our lives and, you know, some things we're doing are good and some things that we're doing are bad.

And God is sort of up there in heaven and He's looking at George and He's trying to figure out whether there, you know, there's a, you know, should George get a guilty, you know, should George be getting a guilty verdict or a, you know, a not guilty verdict?

Has he been a pretty good guy or a pretty bad guy? And my life is progressing and evidence is accumulating and maybe the angels are sort of trying to sort a little bit of it out and at the judgment seat, you know, we'll sort of figure out whether or not how it's all worked in balance.

And what I've just described maybe very poorly is the way the average person thinks about God. In fact, actually, if we're honest, the average person thinks about God in a more skeptical way than this.

[15 : 15] That's how the average religious person thinks about God but probably for the average person who doesn't have much to do with religion, they'd say that God is the one whom we're trying to figure out what the verdict is.

We're trying to figure out whether there's enough evidence to figure out whether he exists. And if he does exist, whether a case can be made that he's a good God or a bad God.

And so for the average Canadian, we stand in judgment on God trying to figure out whether or not God exists, whether or not he is good and whether or not he is worthy of being praised or followed and whether or not Jesus is his son.

And because we are in the judge's seat and God is on trial, if God is very, very lucky and very, very fortunate, we'll eventually give him a very, very favorable sentence. And it's because we carry one of those two attitudes basically in our hearts and in our minds that when we come to the Bible text, it comes as a complete and utter shock.

Listen again to verse 19. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world but people love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

[16 : 26] All those who do evil hate the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth, and later on at the end of chapter 3 we'll see what that means, come into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

This text tells us the shocking piece of news. Apart from Christ, God's verdict has already been set on you and on me before I came to Christ.

Like the verdict is already set. It's not like Law and Order. We're not like in the first one minute of Law and Order that for every single one apart from Christ God has already declared the verdict. And the verdict is that we are ones who hate the light, that we are ones who turn our back on the light, that we are ones who prefer to do evil when we see fit and good when we see fit, but we desire to be the ones to determine when we want to do one thing rather than the other, and it means that we have turned our back from the light, and God has already declared the verdict on your life and mine.

that is profoundly un-Canadian. Let's continue reading the text. We're going to sort of skip to verse 31.

John the Baptist describes there's a conflict between John the Baptist and some Jewish people, and there's a conflict between John the Baptist and his own disciples, and John the Baptist is quite willing to accept the fact that the crowds are going to increase for Jesus and the crowds are going to decrease for him, and in verse 30 he says this famous line, John the Baptist, he must become greater, I must become less.

[18 : 18] The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony the person who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful, for the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Holy Spirit without limit.

What this text is saying is that Jesus alone is from above. Bob might tell you if you talk to Bob later on, if you're in Newfoundland, they refer to people being from away.

And there's Newfoundlanders and then there's those who are from away. And this Bible text is saying that the normal Canadian habit of wanting to place Jesus as one of the prophets or as a great religious leader is fundamentally at odds with who Jesus claims that he is.

And the gospel message claims that John the Baptist, he is from the earth and he speaks as one from the earth. Isaiah, he is from the earth, he speaks as one who is from the earth.

[19 : 34] And whether you use any of the Jewish prophets, whether you even use important religious figures from other faiths, in every case, each and every one of these people is from the earth and they speak as one who is from the earth.

And Jesus is not like any of these other characters because Jesus alone is from above. Jesus alone is from above.

And because Jesus alone is ultimately from above, from heaven, from God himself, he alone is the one who can speak truly with a true perspective of God into our human race.

The Bible here is telling us that Jesus alone is the one who speaks the complete and utter truth. That the words of Jesus aren't opinions that we can weigh and decide whether or not they are smart opinions or wise opinions or good opinions that they are in fact not even statements that ultimately that our minds can judge but that his speaking is making clear in an unadulterated form the very mind of God.

Because Jesus alone is from above, he alone is the one who can give us a new birth. Last week, those of you who were here, I said that the Bible text was pushing us to understand that we had to become in a sense pregnant with a new life that can only come from God.

[21 : 05] That in a sense to be a Christian is to be spiritually pregnant. That we need to have God intervene in our lives in a dramatic and powerful way and create within us a new nature, a new being so to speak that only God can do.

God has to intervene if we are to know him. and it is because Jesus is from above that we can be born from above.

He alone can give that which is completely different from any other prophet. See, that is why we don't form the gospel.

The gospel forms us. We don't ultimately form truths about God we are invited to hear truth from God and to be formed by that truth.

It doesn't mean that we don't use our minds, that we don't muse and meditate and question and put things together. There's a difference between questioning which stands in judgment and questioning which uses the normal process of doubt and insight and noticing of contrast to go deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper in.

[22 : 25] At the end of the day the difference is between whether we use our mind to fortify our mind as a God or whether or not we use our mind because we desire to submit completely and utterly to the truth.

And so the truth of the gospel is not something that we form by religious committees or by declarations of synods. The truth of the gospel is not formed by us we are to be formed by the truth of the gospel into a gospel people.

Listen finally to verse 36. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life but whoever rejects the Son will not see life for God's wrath remains on them.

You'll notice here that the text does not provide a third option. and it also tells us that there is a possibility of a different verdict about our lives.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. For us to call out to Jesus and put our trust in him when we put our trust in him and say Jesus you are the Son of God you are the one who is from above you are the one who has taken away my sin by your death upon the cross.

[23 : 45] You are the one who speaks the very truth of God. I welcome you. I need you. I invite you. I give you permission to have your way in my life. I ask that you plant that eternal life in me.

When we do that we get to hear God's verdict about our lives right now and live our lives in light of his verdict. I don't have the authority to tell you that.

All I can do is tell you that this is what the Bible has just said. That God himself has made the connection between belief in Christ and the gift of eternal life. It's not the result of a committee.

It's not the result of prejudice. It's not the result of human declaration. It is the very message of Jesus. And the question before you and me is this. Do you believe this? Do I believe this?

Do I believe that Jesus only speaks the truth? Do I believe that he has come to speak the truth so that I will no longer be a rebel and suffer a rebel's consequences, but that as a complete and utter sheer gift from him, I might have eternal life and may hear God's final words spoken to me even this day and every day that I live.

[24 : 58] A person who has cancer would be a fool if they said when a cure for cancer has come that they will not accept the cure for cancer because they think there should be 23 cures for cancer and it's arrogant to believe there can only be one cure.

You'd be a fool to reject the cure for cancer if you have cancer. Jesus has broken into this world so that God will offer us a new verdict of our life, a new eternal destiny, a complete and utter gift.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father, thank you for the presence of children.

Thank you, Father, that you heard the deepest cry of our heart, that even Father, while we try to amuse ourselves and distract ourselves and build respectability ourselves and manage ourselves and do all of these things, Father, even in the midst of our own God project and our own project of insulating our life against you, even in the midst of that, you heard far deeper that there is a great cry at the center of our lives, because each of us have a great wound at the center of our lives, because we are separate from you.

Father, thank you that you look at us with love and with compassion and with mercy. Thank you that you have refrained from judgment but sent your Son, that you have set aside judgment for a season, to send your Son to be the Savior.

[26 : 43] Loving Father, may your Holy Spirit move and work in our lives so that we will be willing to say yes to this great offer of your Son, this great gift of your Son, that we might know the verdict has been set aside of guilty and that in your Son Jesus, we might be your adopted children, your precious treasure, your precious belongings, your precious children.

Loving Father, help us to say yes with every ounce and stitch of our being to your Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.