

Essentials for Spiritual Growth

Lesson # 8 -- Growing in Understanding and Practicing Faith.

Introduction

- A. Faith is one of the most important products or activities in the life of the Christian. Only love is given a higher place in the Bible, I Cor 13:13. We cannot please God when we are living in some form of unbelief. This familiar verse underlines the value of growing in understanding and practicing faith.

And **without faith it is impossible to please God**, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Heb. 11:6

- B. Biblical or saving faith is not shared by all members of the human race. Only the Christian has entrusted his life and future to Jesus Christ in faith. The non-Christian may believe in God, the need to come to God and other related subjects, but is without that essential, inner, wholehearted surrender to the person of Jesus Christ that issues in repentance and belief. **True faith is one of distinguishing characteristics of the believer.**

Peter spoke of believers with this characteristic in mind.

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, **To those who** through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ **have received a faith as precious as ours.** II Peter 1:1

I. The Biblical Instruction Regarding Faith.

- A. Faith is a **gift of God in salvation.**

For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is **the gift of God** -- not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph 2:8,9

Comment: One of the terrible effects of the Fall is seen in our natural inability to respond to God in saving faith. **No one can come to God unaided by divine grace.** John 6:44,65 **In the new birth we were given the ability to respond to God.** Faith is an ability, a function whereby we can choose to take God at His Word and put it into practice. While it is true the word "gift" in Eph 2:8 does not related directly to the word "faith" in the Greek, it does relate to "grace" and the passage teaches that faith is included in the grace God has given to us. **It is important that we accept the truth that we can exercise faith, that we can respond to God correctly, even though we may not "feel" that we have such ability. We must teach ourselves not to put "faith in our faith" (feeling of faith).**

B. Faith has a **twofold object** (resting place -- reason for trust).

1. Faith has God as its object -- we are to respond to God.

a. True faith believes in God, and believes God -- as a person.

1). The example of David in his confrontation with Goliath.

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me ... I Samuel 17:45,46

Comment: Notice the personal character of David's faith. This statement, as to why he believed he could overcome Goliath, was not a recitation of some truth like the law of gravity. **David believed God -- believed God was personally with him -- and believed God was going to "hand Goliath over" to him. And then he simply acted on that belief -- and won over Goliath.**

2). The example of Paul when in the storm at sea.

So keep up your courage, men, for **I have faith in God** that it will happen just as he told me. Acts 27:25

Comment: When the Lord told Paul that He would intervene and rescue him and the ship's crew -- **Paul simply believed God.** His faith in God was very personal -- he believed in God as a person -- that He was present with them -- and could be trusted to do what He had said.

Observation: The simple key in the life of David and Paul, regarding faith, is that they "took God for granted" in the good sense of that term. That is, they believed God when He said He would be with them, and that He would do His will through them. It is one of those tragic consequences of the Fall and our own sinfulness -- that we can do many of the right things -- without true faith. Most Christians go to Church on Sunday and, as far as their activity is concerned, it would make no difference if God were dead or alive. Going to Church is simply what they do on Sunday. The same can apply for reading the Bible and praying. How easy it is to live externally as a Christian and not be aware of God's presence, or not *practice His presence* at all. We must join together to pray about this and ask God to teach us how to live in His presence -- He wants it so -- and He has promised it can be so. The decision of faith is with us.

b. True faith believes in God -- because of the kind of Person He is.

No one is like you, **O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power...** But the LORD is **the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.** When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. Jer. 10:6,10

Comment: Such passages remind us that we are to believe God because of His **character and infinite greatness.** He is totally without limitation in His holiness, love, faithfulness, wisdom, and power. He is trustworthy. Not to trust Him, when He has revealed Himself to us, is a terrible sin.

2. Faith has the Bible as its object -- we are to respond to God -- on the basis of His Word.

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, **but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.** Isaiah 55:11

Consequently, faith comes from hearing **the message**, and the message is heard through **the word of Christ.** Romans 10:17

Being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.
Romans 4:21

Comment: The Bible not only gives us **the content of our faith** (what we are to believe), it not only serves **as a blueprint** as to how we are to believe (repent, obey, choose), it not only presents **the motivation to believe God** (love), it **also gives us many promises** to claim regarding our daily life (Matt 7:7; Phil 4:6-9,19; John 5:14). **God expects us to respond to Him on that basis.**

C. Faith is explained in the Bible **as a decision.**

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, **then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. . . Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that **you have chosen to serve the LORD.**" "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied. "**Now then,**" said Joshua, "**throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.**" Josh. 24:15, 22, 23

Since they hated knowledge and **did not choose to fear the LORD**, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. Proverbs 1:29-31

But only one thing is needed. **Mary has chosen what is better**, and it will not be taken away from her. "Luke 10:42

For Ezra had **devoted himself** to the study and **observance** of the Law of the LORD, and to **teaching** its decrees and laws in Israel. Ezra 7:10

Comment: To understand faith as a decision is one of the most important truths that enables a person to grow in the Christian life. As noted above we often try to "feel" faith or wait until we have the right "feeling" that we "have faith." All such appeal to our emotions is unnecessary and actually a hindrance. If one is honest, and living in the will of God (best they know, i.e., not practicing some sin), **then we can make a decision** of faith to pray, claim the promises of God, and launch out to do His bidding. Watch in your reading of the Bible how crucial this point really is. The verses that are noted above and below about this characteristic are only a very few of the many you will find.

D. Faith is a **decision that issues in action.**

Elijah went before the people and said, "**How long will you waver between two opinions?** If the LORD is God, **follow him**; but if Baal is God, **follow him.**" But the people said nothing. I Kings 18:21

In the same way, **faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . .** As the body without the spirit is dead, **so faith without deeds is dead.** James 2:17, 26

You see that **his faith and his actions were working together**, and his faith was made complete by what he did. James 2:22

Comment: The words in the Bible that speak of faith (believe, trust, etc.,) are never described as an intellectual activity only. **To believe something is to practice it.** To attempt to violate this Biblical principle is described as hypocrisy, i.e., professing to believe something, or be someone, that is out of harmony with one's practice.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which **look beautiful on the outside** but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, **on the outside you appear to people as righteous** but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Matthew 23:27 28

II. A Biblical illustration of faith as gift, its twofold object, decision and action.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, **refused** to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He **chose** to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He **regarded** disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he **left** Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he **kept** the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people **passed** through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. Hebrews 11:24-29

A. Moses chose the will of God instead of honor.

"**By faith** Moses, when he had grown up, **refused** (decision of faith) to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter." Hebrews 12:24

Comment: Honor, to Moses, was perhaps even more of a controlling factor in life than it is with us. He had **everything to gain** by remaining "The son of Pharaoh's daughter" and **everything (naturalistically speaking) to lose** by refusing that position. It has been said that Moses may have been in line for the throne. His position in Egypt is described in glowing terms by Luke, "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was **powerful in speech and action.**" Acts 7:22

Honor, acclaim, attention, "clout," **power -- and its ability to control**, may very well be the main idol we worship in America. We see the demonic control behind this idol everywhere in our culture. As a people we will do almost anything for **power**. The employer wants power over the employee. Employees want power over the employer. Wives want power over their husband and husbands want power over their wife. Parents want power over their children and children want power over their parents. Pastors want power over their people and people want power over their pastor. Producers spend millions on advertising to gain power over consumers. We take seminars to gain power. Many perform rituals to gain power. A good deal of our prayers are thinly disguised requests for power over situations and people. We must pray and work together so we can refuse such honor, power and desire for control, with its bondage, and live in freedom. **God offers us great power -- but only if we use it for His glory in the practice of holiness and love.**

B. Moses chose the will of God instead of pleasure.

"He **chose** (decision of faith) to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time." Hebrews 11:25

Comment: His choice involved refusing many years of fame, fun, favor, and fulfillment. Luke pointed out the grace of God involved in His decision of faith when he said, " ...

He (Moses) decided ..." Acts 7:23. While sin, by definition, may be unbelief, it's basic characteristic is self-centeredness. And the heart of self-centeredness is personal pleasure. That is the reason why psychological hedonism cannot be refuted rationally. It would seem that almost all the basic, all-controlling and powerful motivation of life -- is simply -- personal enjoyment. We do what we want to do!

Moses made a clear-cut choice to go against this dominating bondage in his life. Of course it was in cooperation with the grace of God. Without divine grace he would have remained in bondage. Have we responded to that level of grace in our lives? While God has promised us His joy -- the pleasure Moses refused was a self-centered controlling pleasure.

C. **Moses chose the will of God instead of riches.**

"He **regarded** (decision of faith) disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." Heb. 11:26

Comment: How clearly the choice of Moses reveals the words of the Lord Jesus, "You cannot serve both God and money!" Matthew 6:24 Much of our frustration, discontent, bondage and lack of growth can be traced to living out of harmony with our Savior's statement. We must consider the choice of Moses as our example. And, it would help to remind ourselves that he also had a family, daily needs, and a future. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with money, the error is "loving" it -- more than the Lord Jesus. I Timothy 6:10. **When we "love" money we give it control over us -- and behind money stand the demonic kingdom!**

D. **Moses chose the will of God instead of security.**

"By faith he **left** (decision of faith) Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible." Hebrews 11:27

Comment: At first when Moses did what he thought was the will of God (killing the Egyptian) it placed him in danger. Later in life (forty years later) **he was willing to trust** God in spite of how confusing this may have been to him. Such events, coupled with his decisions of faith, produced a Moses with a character of "meekness."

The events reflected in this verse may have been the most difficult for Moses to understand and cope with. When we choose to act on what appears to be the will of God, and are soundly defeated, we tend to ask "Where is God?" Moses was surely not above such a response. **There are many times when our Lord asks us to believe that He is the God of light and truth and yet to walk in darkness and confusion.**

E. **Moses chose the will of God instead of reason.**

"By faith he **kept** (decision of faith) the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel." Hebrews 11:28

Comment: The greatest compliment that we can give our Lord is that we trust Him -- **when we have no tangible reason to do so.** If Moses had not learned to trust the Lord Jesus, in those early years of his life, he would not have been able to serve Him adequately when the more serious problems surfaced. We cannot comprehend the difficulties of leading 600,000 unorganized and complaining men, with their families and herds, from the slavery of Egypt, through a desert, into a land already inhabited by a warlike type of people. If we could ask Moses how he did it, his answer would probably be, "**I just trusted God and did what He told me to do.**" Like David and Paul, the illustrations above, he took for granted that God would be with Him and do what He had promised.

F. **Moses chose the will of God instead of safety.**

"By faith the people **passed** (decision of faith) through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned." Hebrews 11:29

Comment: How responsible Moses must have felt for all the men, women, and children that he had led out of Egypt. **There was danger everywhere:** the Egyptian army, the tribal people about them, the Red Sea, and the lack of food and water. But Moses looked through the circumstances and saw God. As we survey the life of Moses, and read this long list of divine commendations, we begin to understand what faith means. Moses believed God was with him and depended on His instruction when it was needed.. While he was not a robot who had to be told what to do every moment, he was a man of God, who had taken God at His Word. When the Lord called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he had asked "How can I do what You are asking of me?" The Lord's answer was simply "**I'll be with you.**" (Exodus 3:12; 33:14)

Is your provision and mine any different or less? The answer is "No." While we have not been given the task the Lord gave Moses, the resource of His abiding and available presence is as real today, for every sensitive and obedient believer, as it was then, Matthews 28:18-20; Hebrews 13:5,6. Far too often we live a very sub-normal Christian life.

III. **A Practical Application as to the Meaning and Practice of Faith.**

A. The Biblical principle of a Divine-Human Cooperative.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. Mat 7:7

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, **you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.**"
John 4:10

...You do not have, **because you do not ask God.** James 4:2

Comment: These verses, only a few among many, point out what has been called a **Divine-Human Cooperative** that is clearly taught in the Bible. This truth has been popularized by such writers as J. Sidlow Baxter in his book, *His Part and Ours*. **The emphasis is on the truth that the promises of the Bible become fulfilled, realized and practical in our life -- only when we learn to respond to God by faith.** It must be kept in mind that this is **not** earning the grace of God.

B. Illustrations of this Divine-Human Cooperative.

1. The truth illustrated in **prayer**.

And **I will do** whatever **you ask** in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. John 14:13

2. The truth illustrated in **transformation** (ability to live in righteousness).

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, **you wholeheartedly obeyed** the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. **You have been set free** from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. Romans 6:17,18

3. The truth illustrated in **the Fruit of the Spirit**.

May the God of hope **fill you** with all joy and peace **as you trust in him**, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

4. The truth illustrated in **Christian service**.

As **God's fellow workers** we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. II Cor. 6:1

5. The truth illustrated in **the ability to obey**.

Therefore, my dear friends, **as you have always obeyed**--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--**continue** to work out your salvation with fear and

trembling, **for it is God who works in you to will and to act** according to his good purpose. Philippians 2:12,13

6. The truth illustrated in **healing**.

Therefore **confess** your sins to each other and **pray** for each other **so that you may be healed**. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5:16

Comment: These few illustrations clearly indicate the truth that God has called all believers into a life of cooperating with Him. To put it simply it is **When we obey God works**.

This does not mean that God is in any way, under our sinful control or that, He is ever obligated, except in mercy and grace, to respond to us. **However, we have been called to a life of faith -- taking God at His Word, and seeing Him work in and through us.**
No wonder such a life is characterized by love, joy, peace, hope, and power!

IV. Some Biblical Warnings Regarding Faith.

A. Some familiar hindrances to understanding and practicing faith.

1. **Pride** -- which may lead to a failure to believe God and the truth.

For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, **you did not repent and believe him**. Matthew 21:32

Comment: The Jewish people had received many indications that the Lord Jesus was the Son of God and their Messiah. They had the Old Testament prophecies, they heard the Lord Jesus and witnessed His miracles, they saw the benefits of salvation in those who believed (tax-collectors and prostitutes), and they had the unusual ministry of John the Baptist -- and still they did not believe. **It was pride that stood in their way.**
They did not want to admit they had been wrong and they did not want to associate with tax-collectors and prostitutes.

2. **Fear** -- which may lead to a failure to act on faith.

A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, **"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"**
 Mark 4:37-41

Comment: When we are afraid, for whatever reason, it is difficult to go forward in the area of our fear. The Disciples were afraid of drowning and seemingly could not overcome that fear and simply believe they could not drown if God were in the boat -- or

believe that when the drowning was imminent -- the Lord Jesus would deal with the situation. **They acted out of fear and not out of faith.** There are many times when we know we should do something that would be right -- but it is our fear that keeps us from practicing faith.

3. **Laziness** -- which may lead to a failure to search out the truth.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how **slow of heart to believe** all that the prophets have spoken! Luke 24:25

Comment: Since faith is based on accepting the truth of Scripture it is important that we know what is taught in the Bible. All of us have a tendency to talk about certain doctrines that trouble us, or are controversial, but only a few of us take the time to study the subject, come to a conclusion, and then practice the truth they have found. **Spiritual apathy is a serious problems among us as believers.**

4. **Wrong values** -- which may lead to a failure to put God first in life.

How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? John 5:44

Comment: Faith, to be genuine, must be based on the authority of the Bible alone. When we believe some truth because it is popular with those about us, or because we want their approval, we are violating this important principle. We are to believe what we do because it is taught in the Bible -- not because others believe it. **Because certain truths that are clearly Biblical are "despised" and laughed at by "important people" -- we have a tendency not to believe those truths. If we live like this we are not living by faith -- and of course we cannot grow in these areas of our life.**

5. **Unconfessed sin** -- which may lead to a failure to spiritual maturity.

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to **faith and a good conscience.** Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. 1 Timothy 1:18,19

Comment: Note the relationship in these verses between "faith and a good conscience." It is difficult to exercise faith and grow as a believer when we have unresolved areas in our life. It is important to take care of the grudges, anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and sins of our past and present. **Too often the solution is simply to "bury the problem"** instead of dealing with it in a Biblical way and being able to live in freedom.

B. A Biblical event that serves as a serious warning regarding faith.

1. The historical event.

They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. [And}the men who had gone up with him [Caleb] said, "**We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.**" Numbers 13:27, 31

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people **treat me with contempt?** How long will they **refuse to believe in me**, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? Numbers 14:11

Comment: God had given the Israelites **the promise** that He would give them the Land of Canaan many years before (about 600) to Abraham, and then to Isaac, and then Jacob. He had also emphasized the promise to many other, including Moses. **And, He had given the Israelites many indications of His faithfulness and power:** the plagues in Egypt, opening the Red Sea, feeding them with manna, giving them water from rocks, supernaturally protecting them, giving them the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the shekinah to protect them by day, illuminate the camp by night, and to guide them, disciplining those who rebelled, and giving them leaders like Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua.

However, in spite of all this preparation, and the exhortations by Joshua and Caleb -- the people "voted" not to go into the land -- but to return to Egypt! **As a result they treated God with "contempt" (i.e. their actions said "You are not powerful enough, faithful enough, wise enough, and loving enough to give us the land") and they "refused to believe Him."**

2. The Biblical warning and exhortation.

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, **let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.** For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did (those who came out of Egypt); but **the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.** Hebrews 4:1,2

Comment: The writer of the Hebrews puts his finger on the problem all of us have -- we do not **combine the Word of God with faith.** For faith to grow it must be used (practiced -- put into action). The Israelites at Kadesh Barnea were afraid of going into the land and consequently did not "combine" the promise that the land belong to them -- that God was with them -- and He would fight for them -- with faith. As a consequence

none of those who rebelled in unbelief ever got into the Land of Canaan. **This is a serious warning to us. We must "take charge" of our life and not let this happen to us.**

Conclusion: Important Truths to Keep in Mind regarding Faith.

- A. From this lesson one could get the idea that faith is a terribly difficult virtue to practice. **In reality this is not so.** We were given the ability to believe in the new birth and the Holy Spirit dwells within us to help us. We have the promises of God clearly presented in the Scripture. And we all have illustrations from our past of times when we did make progress in this area. **What we must do is to "take God for granted"** -- that He is with us and will keep His Word and uphold us. With that in mind we can make a decision to believe His Word and put it into practice with the attitude of trusting Him. To exercise faith is basically a matter of choice. **However, faith is hard to exercise if one is not surrendered to God, is living partially out of God's will, or allowing pride, fear, laziness, wrong values, or unconfessed sin to rule one's life.**
- B. We must make sure we have Biblical warrant for believing what we do.
- C. We must keep in mind that faith is not a feeling but a decision. We do not need emotional support in order to truly believe God. We are not to put our faith in our (feeling of) faith.
- D. We must choose to believe God in spite of circumstances. Note Rom 4:17-21
- E. We must learn to combine (mix) faith with the Word of God. Heb 4:1,2
- F. We must learn to practice the Word of God by trust.

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