

Faith That Works
(Level I Faith: Trusting God's Word)
Everyday Good News
October 26, 2014

PRELUDE – God's Not Dead
Congregational Songs – God's Not Dead / People of the Risen King

Feature – Forgiven and Loved

Good morning everyone.

In his second letter to Christians who were under the influence of his leadership, the Apostle Peter wrote:

To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 2 Peter 1:1-2 (NIV)

And here's what you know:

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these [his glory and goodness] he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them [his promises] you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 2 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV)

In other words ... “so that you may become more like God and less like the sin-driven world around you.”

For this very reason [because God has done all of this for you], make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection [love for other Christians]; and to mutual affection, love [for everyone]. 2 Peter 1:5-7 (NIV)

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have these qualities [whoever is not becoming more like God and less like the world] is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. 2 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

As Nathan said, we are continuing in our series “Faith That Works.” As I explained last week, the reason we’re doing this deep dive series on “Faith” (which is going to run from now through Christmas) is that, as a pastor, I have seen many people over the years who simply did not understand “faith” and, as a result, became discouraged and disillusioned with God.

- Some had been misinformed and taught to think of “faith” as believing something strongly enough that God was obligated to act accordingly (sort of like rubbing the magic genie lamp in just the right way in order to get the desired result).
- Others had confused *Christian faith* with what has become our de-facto cultural faith: *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*: the idea that God is a benign Cosmic Therapist “out there somewhere” who simply wants everyone to feel good about themselves, to be nice and get along with others ... and who will show up when we need help solving a problem that’s beyond us.

I described that kind of faith in detail last week so I won’t go into it any further today other than to reiterate that Christian faith is based *not* on a nebulous belief in a nameless generic divinity that pops in and out on *our* initiative. Christian faith is based on belief in what *the one and only God* has already said and done of *His own initiative* through *the one and only person* of Jesus of Nazareth. That’s

the foundation of our faith.

In fact, as I described where we're going in this series, I said that this was ...

Level I Faith – faith that trusts in God's Word.

Now, that terminology is a little confusing because, typically, when Christians say "God's Word" we mean "the Bible."

And I unfortunately did not have time to go into this last week, but the kind of faith I am talking about here (Level I Faith) is not trust in the Bible (though we *can and should* trust the Bible). As we've talked about on several occasions, Christian faith is not fundamentally dependent on the 66 books that make up the Old and New Testaments. It logically could not be because none of the first-century believers had those 66 books. Some weren't even written yet!

The Ultimate "Word of God"

Instead, Christian faith is fundamentally based on trust in the *ultimate* Word of God ... which is the title repeatedly given to Jesus of Nazareth.

For instance, in the opening of the Gospel of John we read that ...

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. John 1:1-4 (NIV)

And ...

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (NIV)

... which, obviously, is a reference to Jesus of Nazareth.

By the way, the guy who wrote that passage was one of Jesus' best friends, the Apostle John, so when he talks about seeing his glory, he really means "seeing." He means he saw the Word-in-flesh with his own eyes. He means Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human being ... not some "mystical, lofty idea" born of wishful thinking.

Later, the author of the letter to the Hebrews alluded to the same metaphor when he wrote ...

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. Hebrews 1:1 (NIV)

His Son – Jesus – is God's word.

Of course ... it kind of makes you wonder: if God truly has spoken to us in Jesus, what was He saying?

Obviously, lots of things Jesus said and did in his time on earth are recorded for us in the New Testament but, amazingly, the Apostle Paul answered that exact question in a broad overall sense when he wrote the opening lines of the letter we call II Corinthians. Paul wrote:

As God is true, the language in which we address you is not an ambiguous blend of "Yes" and "No." The Son of God, Christ Jesus, proclaimed among you by us was never a blend of "Yes" and "No." 2 Corinthians 1:18

(NEB)

With him it was, and is, "Yes." He (Jesus) is the "Yes" pronounced upon God's promises, every one of them. That is why, when we give glory to God, it is through Christ Jesus that we say "Amen" [which means "so be it" or ... "yes!"]. 2 Corinthians 1:19-20 (NEB)

In other words, when the Word became flesh ... when God "spoke" his final word in and through the birth, life, death and physical resurrection of the person of Jesus of Nazareth ... he was saying "Yes."ⁱ

- He was saying "Yes" to the promise of a renewed, restored and regenerated creation (which began, literally, in Jesus' own body when he was raised from the dead and will continue in our physical bodies when Jesus returns).
- Jesus is the "Yes" to God's promise that the day is coming when our world will be characterized by peace and justice instead of war and hatred.
- Jesus is the "Yes" pronounced upon God's promise of friendship and belonging to those who were once, because of sin, his enemies and separated from his presence.
- Jesus is the "Yes" pronounced upon God's promise that salvation is available to *anyone* who believes regardless of nation or tribe or religion or political party.
- And He is the "Yes" pronounced upon God's promise that death is not the ultimate victor for those who trust in Jesus.

This is why our faith as Christians is fundamentally based on trusting what God has said and done in, through and because of Jesus.

And this is why the first thing we always say whenever we talk about those who are far from God coming to a relationship with God is that "you need to come to a point of personally placing your trust in Jesus." That's the starting point. You don't begin Christian faith without the fundamental conviction that Jesus of Nazareth gave his life on the cross to atone for – to make restitution for – all of your sins past, present and future and that He rose again on the third day afterwards. Over and over again, the writings of the Apostles make it clear that this is the one and only entrance to salvation. *We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.*

However, my point in this series is not *only* that this kind of trust is the *starting point* of faith. It's that this kind of trust is the *foundation* of faith. It's the first level. If faith is like a house, this is the ground floor. It doesn't go away when you add more levels. It's always present and always supporting those other levels.

And there are two other levels of faith:

- Faith that trusts in God's wisdom enough to live the way Jesus taught and exemplified for us (instead of what's taught and exemplified for us by the world).
- And faith that trusts in God's ways enough to overcome or endure *and stay faithful to Him* through times of trial and tribulation when it's just not clear what He is doing in our lives.

A Solid Foundation

But before we can get to those levels (and we will get to the second level next week), we need to make sure we have Level I, the ground floor, solidly in place ... which is what I want to do with the rest of the time we have today.

And at this point, I want to make it clear that I'm going to be speaking to those among us who have come to the point of entry (or, I should say, those who have come *through* the point of entry). I am speaking to those who have realized that they truly are sinners in need of a savior, who have no justification before God and who have believed in and received Jesus and what He did for them. In other words, I'm speaking to those who are Christians.

Now, if you could survey a group of serious, devout, and committed Christians and ask them "what does God want you to be doing

in this world? What kind of a life does he want you to live?” most would respond with something very similar to what the Apostle Peter wrote in that passage I read at the beginning of this message. Most would say “Well, I think God wants me to become more like Christ and less like the sin-driven world around me. There needs to be a change in me; specifically, in my character.”

“I think God wants me to ...

... make every effort to add to my faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.”
2 Peter 1:5-7 (NIV)

“After all ...

If I possess these qualities in increasing measure, I can be more effective and productive in my knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
2 Peter 1:8 (NIV)

“In other words, my relationship with Jesus will impact my everyday life. Salvation is just the beginning of the journey – not the end of it.”

And clearly this is true – and we know it not just from what Peter wrote but also from what Paul wrote after that famous passage where he said “we have been saved by grace through faith.” Paul went on to say that “we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus – God did all of this to make us new creations in Christ – so that we could do the good works that God has planned for all of his people.”

And that, of course, echoes what the Apostle James had to say when he wrote:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead ... You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

James 2:14-17,19 (NIV)

If there’s one thing that’s clear in the writings of the Apostles and even in the words of Jesus Himself, it’s that we are saved by faith alone but that faith – if it is real – *will never be alone*. It will always be accompanied by external evidence of some kind. It will produce fruit that is in keeping with a changed opinion about God and openness to His leadership in our life. It will enable us, in the words of Peter, to “make every effort” to add to our life all of those qualities that he listed:

- Goodness – a desire and ability to just do the right thing
- Knowledge – the experience of knowing God personally and understanding the things and nature of God
- Self-control – the ability to say no when you ought to say no and yes when you ought to say yes
- Perseverance – the strength to keep going in goodness, knowledge and self-control when it’s not easy and you want to quit
- Godliness – a sense of God’s presence and ability to discern what the Holy Spirit is doing in your life
- Mutual affection – care and concern for other Christians, supporting them in their faith, supporting the church that supports everyone in their faith
- And finally, love – unconditional goodwill towards other people in general, including our enemies.

In Christ, God’s divine power has already given us everything we need in order to be able to live like that; to be able to be more like Him and less like the sin-driven world around us. Irenaeus, an ancient Christian theologian, once wrote: “In His immeasurable love God became what *we are* in order to make us what *He is*.”

A more recent theologian, Martin Lloyd-Jones put it like this:

“A Christian is one who is a partaker of the divine nature. The traits and characteristics of God Himself, the divine life, are his (or hers). He is like Christ. The life of godliness, the divine quality of life, the divine characteristics are *in him*, are being *formed in him*, and he (or she) is manifesting these divine characteristics.”

“That, according to Peter, is the thing to which we are called; that is what is demanded and expected of you and me as Christians. We do not merely believe that our sins are forgiven in Christ – thank God that we do believe that – but we must not stop at that. I am not merely one who is forgiven, I am to be a partaker of the divine nature; I am to be a new man, a new woman, a new creation, a new being; and I am to reveal and manifest these characteristics. This is the calling of Christians.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What We Must Remember

Of course, most Christians, if you asked them – “So, how’s it going with that? How’s it going with all of those virtues” – most would probably say, “Well, some days are better than others. Some days, I feel like I really do have God’s power at work in me and I really can make every effort so that my salvation works itself out into my character. I can see it and it’s awesome. Other days – truth is – other days I wonder if I’m even saved in the first place because things come out of me that just aren’t a whole lot like Jesus.”

Ever feel that way? I do.

In fact, not too long ago, I found myself in a situation with a person who just flat pushed my buttons in a way that few people ever have. In fact, the only person I can remember having this kind of effect on me is the kid (who I’ve told you about before) who used to regularly beat me up after school when I was in the fifth and sixth grades. Whenever I would think about the situation and this person and what they were saying and doing ... well, have you’ve heard the old line about a situation or a person being “frustrating enough to make a preacher cuss?”

It’s true. It really does happen.

For whatever reason (I’ll play amateur psychologist and say I think it’s related to the memory and emotion over the injustice of being bullied as a kid), whenever I would get to talking about this particular situation, I was so overwhelmed with anger that I found myself using profanity. I would feel the words forming in my mind, and I knew that I should restrain myself, but I didn’t. I just let it flow (to my own shame and embarrassment).

Now, just to be clear, the problem was not (and is not) being angry. I mean, just read the Bible: *Jesus got angry*. The problem is that the Bible also says “in your anger *do not sin*,” but that’s what I’m doing. I find myself thinking and saying things that I don’t want to think or say; things that I’m pretty sure that *God* doesn’t want me to think or say. I am falling short of God’s intentions for my life. I am sinning while I am angry.

But here’s the part that really bothers me. For the majority of my adult life (long before I became a pastor), I *never* used profanity. I might have thought it but it never came out of my mouth. It was nothing to restrain myself. In fact, I was kind of proud of that. I can remember going around thinking, “my record is still perfect. I’ve never cussed out loud. Look at me.”

But, sadly, that’s not true anymore. And I try to make a joke about it, you know, like “being a preacher is enough to make a person cuss!” But the truth is that it feels like I’m going backwards on this issue. And not just this issue. I mean it has been such a losing battle lately to control my eating.

And when I dwell on the thought that I’m going backwards in my Christian life, another very discouraging thought sometimes

comes to me: “I will never be in this life what I am supposed to be. Why even bother trying?”

Ever have that thought? I’m sure some of you have.

Now, here’s the scary part: if we dwell on that thought long enough – if we let that fester and roll around in our heads long enough – we might just decide that’s the best plan. We might just quit. We might just throw in the towel on this “faith” thing and turn and walk away. Or maybe we won’t literally walk away. We’ll just go through the motions externally but internally there won’t be a whole lot happening.

Lots of people have done it. *And that’s very sad because it’s totally unnecessary. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.*

So, how is it supposed to work?

Let’s go back to what Peter wrote about all those virtues that we need to be adding to our faith – to our trust in God’s Word, Jesus of Nazareth and what He has done for us.

After he lays out his list he says ...

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that makes sense. The more we become like Christ, the more God can use us as His representatives in this world. But then Peter makes this very interesting statement; one that I think applies directly to the issue we’re talking about right now.

He says ...

But whoever does not have these qualities is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. 2 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

Whoever is not going forward, he says, is not remembering something. Whoever is falling backwards, or throwing in the towel is not seeing something they ought to be seeing. In short, they are not living out of the forgiveness that is already theirs. They are not seeing themselves as God sees them in Christ.

Now, here’s why that matters. And pay close attention to this because, for some of you, this is going to change everything about how you look at your life as a Christian.

We cannot become more of who God wants us to be unless we realize where we need his power to transform us. But in the stubbornness of our basic human nature, we will not realize that we need God’s power until it becomes clear to us just how short we fall of His intentions for our lives.

So, here’s what’s going to happen in your life and mine, if we’re Christians: the longer you walk with God, the longer you are a Christian, the longer you hang in there, the more your sinful nature (and my sinful nature) will be revealed.

Let me say that again. The longer you are hanging out with God, doing this church thing and this Christian thing, the more you are going to see of your sinful nature because, God is going to put us into situations where our arrogance and our pride and our self-sufficiency and our sense of self-righteousness is broken and we’ll realize we really do need his power. For me, as I said, not “cussing in anger” or not cussing at all was a source of pride. I felt morally superior to pretty much everyone because of it. I wouldn’t have said it out loud but that was my attitude. “All these people, they’re so undisciplined. Why can’t they get their act together ... like me.”

But not anymore ... because the longer you walk with God, the more He will put you in situations that reveal to you your sinful nature so *that* you can just turn to Him and say, “I need you to help me. I need your Holy Spirit to change me. This is not something I can do on my own.”

I like the way one commentator describes it:

God doesn't deny, nor does He want us to deny, the reality of any of these deficiencies. In fact, it is primary to God's purpose that we come face to face with them. God wants us to see, and confess, that we cannot find Him if we are left to ourselves. God wants us to see that we cannot fix our mistakes.

Most of us still carry along the notion that God is looking for a YES or AMEN in US – and that until He finds it, we will get nowhere. But this is really the opposite of the Truth. God is actually trying to bring us to where we are totally convinced that there is no YES and no AMEN to be found in us. In other words, there is absolutely NOTHING about us that we can hold up to God as a reason why He is obligated to us. NOTHING. God is obligated to us only because He has, out of His love, obligated Himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

That's why it is so important – and this gets to what Peter was saying – that ...

When our sinful nature is revealed, we must remember and rest in the good news of the gospel, or we will become demoralized by that realization.

Peter is saying that when people aren't increasing in godly character – when they are not becoming more like Christ and less like the sin-driven world – they are not living out of the truth. They have forgotten the good news of what Jesus did for them! They are still thinking of themselves as condemned sinners; as men and women who are under judgment and not as men and women who are new creatures, totally forgiven and recipients of everything they need for a life that reflects God's character.

That's why one of my favorite authors, Brennan Manning, once said that “faith is the courage to accept your acceptance from God.” It's accepting that ...

“The God and Father of Jesus is gracious, that he loves us in a way that defies human comprehension and escapes human imitation; that God loves us unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody in this room is as they should be.

“I've been a Christian 40 years,” he said, “and I've watched the way people live -- lives of anxiety, fear, shame, remorse, low self-esteem, self-condemnation. Oh, they believe God loves them in a vague, distant, abstract way but they'd be hard pressed to say right now that the essence of their Christian life is a love affair. And not just a simple love affair, but what G.K. Chesterton calls a “furious love affair” going on between Christ and themselves at this very moment.

“This moment,” he asked, “do you honestly believe that God loves *you* (not the person next to you)? Not that God just loves Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, or that God loves the church, the world, and in some vague way the whole human race, but that God loves *you*? Beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity, that he loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain, without caution, regret, boundary, limitation -- that no matter what's gone down (or is going down), he *cannot* stop loving you?

“If you don't trust that, you're living a life of illusion, superstition, cowardice. You are projecting onto Jesus your own hateful feelings toward yourself, assuming He feels about you the way you feel about you. And thus you are worshipping a God of human manufacturing, a God who does not exist.

“There is one God of the Christian vision,” Manning says, “the God revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ, who at this moment walks directly to your seat, looks you straight in the eye and says, ‘I have a word for you. I know your whole life

story. Right now I know your shallow faith, your feeble prayer life, and your inconsistent discipleship. Nothing is hidden from my eyes.

“And my word is this, ‘I dare you to trust that I love you as you are and not as you should be, because you’re never gonna be as you should be.’”^{iv}

Manning’s words are the words of a man who knows that he is completely and totally forgiven and loved. Can you say those words? Do you believe those words? Do I?

I hope you can and you do because unless you trust that God has truly accepted you, forgiven you and loves you just as you are ... it will be impossible for you to trust His wisdom and trust His ways. Unless you believe – and continue to believe – that in Christ, God’s pronouncement concerning you is “YES,” it will be impossible for you to say yes to Him in everyday life. We say Yes to Him because He first said Yes to us.

That’s why level one faith is so important: trusting in God’s Word – Jesus of Nazareth – and what He has done on your behalf and who you really are and who you are becoming and who you will become because of Him.

And this is why we say all the time around here that those of us who are Christians – those of us who have come to the point in our lives where we believe that what Jesus did on the cross was for us and we’ve invited Him to be our savior – we say that this good news of unmerited love and grace must shape *everything* about us:

- How we look at ourselves
- How we think of God
- How we interpret the events and circumstances of our lives
- What we hope for others and how we treat them ... even when they are our enemies.

We absolutely must be rooted and grounded in love and grace^v which is why we need to constantly call timeout and remember what God has done and declared in Christ.

Communion

And He has actually given us a way to do that. We call it “the Lord’s Supper” or communion.

And in the next few minutes, we’re going to observe this together. Our band is going to do a song and while they do, our ushers are going to distribute a little cup of bread and juice. When you get yours, please hold onto it until the song ends because I’m going to tell you how we’re going to do that. We want to do this together as a church this morning so just hang on to it.

One more thing: In just a minute, when this plate comes by you, some of you - and I’ve seen this again and again - some of you are not going to take communion. You are going to hesitate because you’re thinking, “I’m not worthy of this. I’m not living like I should. I would be a hypocrite ... etc. etc.”

Well, guess what? *No one in this room is worthy of this; none of us are living like we should; all of us are hypocrites.* We’re all sinners. That’s why Jesus gave his life for us!

So, this time isn’t about how good or worthy we are. It’s not about our Yes to God. It’s about how good and worthy Jesus is. It’s about his Yes to us. And it’s an expression that we really do believe that and that we really do trust what Jesus has done.

“Let us come boldly to the throne of grace,” the Bible says, and I hope you’ll do that in the next few minutes. Ok? Take a cup and hold on to it and then we’ll all receive it together.

Here we go ...

Feature – Behold the Lamb / distribute communion

Receive communion

On the night he was betrayed, the Bible tells us that Jesus had a meal with his disciples.

And during that meal, he took bread and broke it and said to them, “This is my body which is about to be broken for you.” And then, in the same way, after supper he took the cup and said, “this is my blood which is about to be poured out for you.”

And then he said, “in the future, do this – with the bread and the cup – to remember me and what I’ve done for you. Remember that you are more than a sinner. Remember that you are – if you believe, if you have faith in Jesus and what He did – you are forgiven. Remember that you are one in whom God dwells and one who has been given everything you need to live the kind of life he wants you to live every day.”

So, take the bread and remember his body and drink the juice and remember his blood.

Let’s stand together and sing this song as our closing prayer.

Congregational Song – Remind Me Who I Am

Endnotes

ⁱ This list is from a similar list at <http://whit537.org/2009/12/ironically-actually-jesus-is-gods-yes.html>

ⁱⁱ D.M. Martin Lloyd-Jones, 2 Peter, pg. 15

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.goodnewsarticles.com/Aug05-1.htm>

^{iv} *ibid*

^v Ephesians 3:17-17