

Faith That Works
(Level I: Trusting God's Word)

Faith is Not Blind

October 19, 2014

PRELUDE – “Mighty to Save”

Worship Songs – “Our God's Alive” / “Your Love Never Fails”

Video – Brandon Heath concert promo

Feature – “Something to Believe In”

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said, today we are beginning a brand new series – one that I have been looking forward to for a very long time. In fact, this series has actually been “building up” inside of me for several years as I have had the opportunity to interact with many of you as your pastor ... as well as reflecting on my own life experiences as a Christian. And I will say right up front that I have *very* high hopes for what we are going to accomplish each Sunday from now through Christmas.

In fact, I will make a promise to you (similar to the one I made last fall when we did the extended series on grace): *I promise that if you show up for every message in this series (or listen, watch or read online when you can't be here) – if you will do this deep dive on “faith” with me, not only will you know more about what it means to “have faith” than ever before, your faith will be more solid and secure than ever before.*

My goal in this series is the same as the Apostle Paul's when he wrote to the first-century Christ followers at Ephesus:

... that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Ephesians 4:12-13 (NIV)

And that matters greatly because, as I mentioned a couple months ago when I did a message on “How Faith Can Mess Up Your Life,” I have seen so many people over the years – good Christian men and women – tossed back and forth by the waves of trials and tribulations – trials and tribulations that are part of living in a sin-cursed world – because they simply did not understand faith. For some, their understanding was simply immature and lacking. Others had been misinformed because of exposure to “every wind of teaching” (and there are many teachings about “faith” these days. As the song put it, people are desperately looking for something to believe in).

And the result in both cases was an unrealistic expectation of what faith could and should accomplish ... followed by great disappointment and disillusionment when it did not.

As I was preparing for this message, I read about a guy named Larry Parker who, in 1980 wrote a book entitled *We Let Our Son Die*. His book tells the story of how he and his wife — after being influenced by a certain type of teaching on “faith” — withheld insulin from their diabetic son. Predictably, the boy went into a diabetic coma. Larry and his wife, having been warned about the danger of making a “negative confession” (i.e., expressing doubts about their course of action) continued to “positively confess” their son’s healing ... until the time of his death.

If that wasn’t shocking enough, even after their son’s death, the Parkers — undaunted in their “faith” — conducted a *resurrection service* instead of a funeral. For more than one year following their son's death, they refused to abandon the “revelation knowledge” they had received. Eventually, they were tried and convicted of manslaughter and child abuse.ⁱ

Obviously, that’s an extreme example of a faith that ended in disillusionment. For most of us, our disappointments aren’t quite so dramatic. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t painful.

So, in an effort to minimize that pain (and I mean the pain of a misguided faith, not the pain of living in a fallen world – there is no cure for that until Jesus returns and makes all things new) ... in an effort to minimize that pain, we’re going to be working to develop a deeper understanding of what faith really is over the next nine weeks. And what we’re going to do is to break this series into three parts.

In Part I, which begins today and will last for two weeks, we’re going to discover what I’m calling “Level I Faith” ... which is “trusting God’s Word.”

I call it Level I because this is the foundation of everything else that follows: trusting what God has already said and done in the past. And we’ll be talking about why that matters so much in the present of our everyday lives.

In Part II, which will last for four weeks, we’re going to look at what I’m calling “Level II Faith” ... which is trusting God’s wisdom (instead of our own wisdom or the world’s wisdom) for how we live our everyday lives.

There are a lot of voices telling us these days about how we should or should not live our lives but, for those of us who have faith, the voice of God will be the most prominent. That’s why the Apostle James wrote that “faith without works is dead” meaning “if your faith doesn’t work itself out in how you live your everyday life, something is wrong with your faith. It’s of no value to you. It’s lifeless. It’s powerless. It’s dead.”

And in that part of this series we’ll look at some very specific ways that trusting God’s wisdom affects daily life. It’s going to be great. I can’t wait.

Finally, in Part III, which will last for three weeks – the first three Sundays of December – we’re going to look at what I’m calling “Level III Faith: Trusting God’s Ways.”

I’m excited about that part of the series because it’ll be Christmas and we’ll get to learn some of the principles of this level of faith by looking at several of the characters in the story of Jesus’ birth. More importantly, we’ll talk about how faith works when the future seems uncertain - when we’re faced with trials and tribulations. What does it look like to trust God’s will and God’s ways in directing our lives?

Now, from that brief outline, I think two things become clear right away.

1. Faith is about trusting God. Specifically ...

- Can I *trust* what He has said and done in the past enough to open myself up to Him and build my whole life on it?
- Can I *trust* His wisdom on how to live everyday life enough to follow the example of Jesus rather than the example of the culture (or my family or my own intuition and reason)?
- Can I *trust* what He is doing to shape my future is good even though I can't always see it or understand it, and I may not even agree with it?

Faith is about trusting God in all those dimensions.

2. Faith is multi-dimensional.

- There's an aspect of it that is rooted in the distant past.
- There's a dimension that impacts the present.
- And there's a dimension that deals with the future.

Our De-Facto Faith

Unfortunately, however, what a lot of people mean when they talk about “faith” doesn't have anything to do with *God* (at least, not the God of the Bible). And while it does quite often deal with how things are going to work out in the future (“will I be safe/comfortable/happy/married/ fulfilled/rich/healthy/etc?”), “faith” doesn't have anything to do with building a life foundation – a core identity as a person – or in following the revealed wisdom of God in everyday life.

About 10 years ago, researchers at the University of North Carolina did a study of the religious beliefs of American teenagers. After interviewing more than 3,000 adolescents, the researchers reported that, when it came to the most crucial questions of faith and beliefs, many teenagers responded with a shrug and “whatever.” Most were incredibly inarticulate about their religious beliefs, the study said, virtually unable to offer any serious theological understanding. In spite of that, teenagers were surprisingly *not* without faith and spiritual awareness. In fact, researchers were able to discern a widely-held set of beliefs which they labeled “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (or MTD for short).

What's MTD?

MTD is, at its core, about feeling good, happy, secure, and at peace. “It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.” In fact, being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful is the definition of what it means to be a good, moral person.

MTD hypothesizes a God who exists, created the world ... but not one who is particularly involved in one's affairs—especially “affairs in which one would prefer *not* to have God involved.” The God of this generic faith is

one who keeps a safe distance. He is often described as “watching over everything from above” and “the creator of everything and . . . just up there now controlling everything.” God sometimes *does* get involved in people’s lives, but usually only when they call on Him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved.

And when He does get involved, this God is “not demanding. He actually can’t be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. God is something like a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, helps his people feel good about themselves, but does not become too personally involved in their lives.”

Obviously, there isn’t an organized MTD religion or a “church of MTD” that you could attend anywhere. But it is currently, today, the “de facto, functional, practical religion” that defines our entire culture. And I say that because *those kids of 10 years ago are now adults and have great influence in our culture*. Furthermore, according to that study of 10 years ago, those teenagers then were ... and this is extremely important to understand ... “merely absorbing and reflecting religiously *what the adult world [then was] routinely modeling for its youth.*”ⁱⁱ In other words, the vague, generic, spiritual ambiguity was inherited from their parents!

The result (in spite of the efforts of the ACLU and evangelists for atheism) is today we live in a very spiritual culture which has embraced a God of its own design. In the language of the Old Testament, we have created an idol that stands at the head of what could be called our “dominant civil religion.”

For example, last Tuesday evening, thanks to the generosity of several NHCCers, my dad and I and my middle daughter KT had the privilege of attending the third game of the ALCS at Kaufmann Stadium. It was awesome! And in the middle of the 7th inning (and this is something that’s been happening at baseball games since 9/11), we all stood together and heartily sang “God Bless America.” And you could tell that people were sincere and it was a feel-good moment. And I enjoyed it.

But at the same time, it would have been shocking – and terribly inappropriate – if someone would have asked “so, why *would* God want to bless America? As a culture, are we pleasing to God? Are we worthy of His blessing? And, if not, are we willing to repent individually and collectively, to turn from sin and seek His face?”

Those questions are so foreign to where we are spiritually, as a culture, that to ask them is to invite ridicule and possibly even persecution. I’m sure you’ve heard by now about the city of Houston, TX issuing subpoenas for any sermon of any pastor within city limits that mentioned homosexuality or the current mayor – who happens to be a homosexual. They have since walked that back and rescinded the order, but the initial reaction was to punish anyone who dared to violate the credo of the de-facto civil religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism; “We’re going after these people.”

Now, the reason I tell you all of this is so that you can see at least some of the differences between biblical faith (which is about trusting God in multiple dimensions of life in a way that actually impacts and affects those dimensions) and what has become our de-facto cultural faith.

But more important than that is the observation that cultural faith (MTD) is actually cannibalizing

biblical faith.

In the words of the researchers from 10 years ago, “We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually [only] tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but is rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

In other words, more and more people who call themselves “Christians” these days are, for all practical purposes, Moralistic Therapeutic Deists without even realizing it.

Why did they conclude that?

Here's what they wrote:

“The language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers ... to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.”

“This radical transformation of Christian theology and Christian belief,” writes one commentator, “replaces the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of the self.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And what that means on an individual level is that “faith” for a lot of Christians is no longer about God and His Word and His Wisdom and His Ways. Instead, “faith” has become *all about me* and *what I think* and *what I want* and what my imaginary God ought to do to bring it about.

The Rise and Fall of MTD

That's a pretty strong indictment of where we are. Of course, a really good question is ... how did we get here?^{iv}

We got here because for the past 150 years or so, church leaders in the Western world have elevated *relevance* over *substance* — focusing on the *feeling, the emotion*, that something is meaningful rather than the *truth* that something is meaningful.

I'll try not to bore you too much with the historical details but it is kind of interesting. It started with a highly influential theologian of the 1800s by the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher who became convinced that the essence of Christianity was its “spiritual impulse” *not its doctrine*. Doctrine, in his opinion, was the cause of violent conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and threatened to stifle scientific progress and human achievement.

In Schleiermacher's thinking, if one could boil ideas down to a common essence, differences would dissipate and humanity could move forward in harmony. That essence was “religiosity” or “spirituality” — a sense of connection to God that every human being has the capacity to feel and experience. So, he started to teach a form of Christianity that began with personal internal experiences of God and built theology around those experiences, reconfiguring doctrine as needed. He assumed that by starting with ourselves and our desires, we would have a clearer vision of God and perhaps a more relevant church.

Schleiermacher's perspective took hold and, over time, individual Christians were taught (and accepted) the idea that *their experience* of God is the touchstone of truth about God, rather than being taught (and learning) to evaluate their experiences in light of Scripture and theology.

Unfortunately, that perspective put humans instead of God in the driver's seat and became the seed that eventually gave rise to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and its increasing influence in Western Christianity ... to the point where we now live in a nation that ...

- Largely still thinks of itself as “Christian”
- Overwhelmingly believes in some deity out there
- Is fervently religious (“God Bless America”)
- But has virtually no connection to historic Christianity.^v

Now, at this point some of you may be wondering ... so what? What difference does it make if faith isn't connected to historic Christianity? I mean, if the faith people have makes them happy; if it allows them to experience more fulfillment in life and feel more in touch with themselves and the supernatural world; if it makes them better people and makes them want to help other people, why is that such a bad thing?

Four reasons ... the first three very quickly.

1. MTD, the cultural faith that we have, is “blind faith” ... a belief without any existential evidence. There's nothing rooted in history about this.

And blind faith is *not* what Christians are called to.

For example, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly offered the evidence of His miracles to verify his identity and told His observers that this evidence was sufficient:

“Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.” (John 14:11)

“If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:37-38)

Furthermore, the Gospel writers make it very clear that they are telling us what really happened in history, existential evidence, so we can believe there is a reason for our faith. Christianity is not blind faith.

2. Experience-driven faith like MTD cannot produce long-term growth in a person.

If it's based on my experience – on how I feel – and I don't “feel it” then I'm bailing. I'm not going to hang in there. That's how life works in general. If I don't *feel* like eating right or working out and my diet and exercise is driven by those feelings, I'm not going to get in shape.

3. Experience-driven faith can be easily deceived into calling what is evil “good.”

And this is a little hard to follow, but stay with me because it's worth it. Because it's driven by what we think

and feel instead of what God has said and done, MTD is highly susceptible to “group-think” ... and “group-think” (what – and who – a culture collectively decides to accept and reject) has perpetrated some of the worst horrors known to humanity. It’s no exaggeration to say that Schleiermacher’s philosophy had significant influence in the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust which labeled the slaughter of millions of Jews as “good.”

Finally, and I want to spend a little bit of time on this one because it brings us back full-circle to where we started this message ...

4. A faith that is based primarily on what I feel and experience (and not on historic Christian truth and Christian doctrine), cannot withstand the waves of trials and tribulations.

I’ve thought a lot about this in recent days. As most of you know, last week Jetta and I went back to Bowie, MD to the church that had such a great influence on me as a teenager (where I was taught historic Christian faith and not Moralistic Therapeutic Deism). I had not been there in almost 35 years.

When we got to the first event, before we went in, Jetta said, “Now, remember, all of your friends are not people in their late teens and early 20s anymore. You’re looking for grandpas and grandmas!”

And she was right. <pic of Rick and friends>

All the people I remembered as being so young were now old. Like me. And it was great to see them and hug their necks and celebrate what God had done for us so many years ago, but it was also sad because we’re not what we used to be. And we’re not going to be ever again in this life.

It was sad because some were not there because they were not able to function physically anymore or their lives had ended prematurely because of cancer or because of a raging depression which lead to suicide. Two goofball brothers that I had run around with – who were always laughing and cutting up – took their own lives in the past couple of years. I couldn’t believe it.

And then of course in the middle of all of that, there’s the Ebola scare – which I realize isn’t going to be a big deal for 99.9% of us – but, gosh for the people who it does affect! And then there’s the ISIS idiots raping, torturing and beheading people who don’t agree with them ... and the stock market is down by 10% this month ... and there are really good people getting laid off at Sprint ... and a six-year-old girl who was shot and killed by drive-by shooters in our town ... and there’s more racial tensions in Ferguson ... and then there’s the guy who helped start this church 20 years ago who got a diagnosis of cancer and just started treatment in *hopes* that ...

And in the middle of all this, the Royals are winning and going to the World Series ... and Sung Woo is coming back for it ... and it’s exciting and it’s fun. But as big of a Royals fan as I am (heck, I’ve been to Spring Training for last five years; they’ve never let me on the field yet, but one of these days...) and as much joy as it brings me to see them do what they are doing, in spite of that, I still feel a heaviness inside of me. What kind of a world is this? Crazy!

And I have a great life. I really do. I have a great family and friends. I have a great job and a great place to live. But if my faith was dependent on how I sometimes feel and what I experience in my soul, I would be totally lost. I’d be tossed to and fro on the waves of the next disaster that I hear about or see someone go through or, heaven forbid, experience myself.

Trusting in God's Word

And that's where some of you are right now. You're seeing the same kinds of things I'm seeing but your life is *not* great for one reason or another. And because your faith is not solidly in the God of historic Christianity but in the wishy-washy make-believe fairytale God of our cultural faith, you're drowning. You're about to go under for the last time.

And so this morning I want to throw you a life-preserver, spiritually speaking (and maybe even literally speaking). And here it is:

In Christianity (which is not the same as the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism) we do not start with “my spirituality” or “my experience with God” and then identify core beliefs. Instead, we begin with core beliefs—those discovered by the church through the centuries as it has intellectually wrestled with the truth of Scripture in the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. Those beliefs, which come from outside me, shape and even correct my spiritual experience.^{vi}

This is why the Bible says that ...

We live by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

Some people think that is saying Christians are supposed to live by blind faith. Actually, it means just the opposite. It means, if you're a Christian, you are to approach life by trusting what God has said and done already in history (which is faith) and not by what we see happening in the world around us, or our experience (which is sight).

We live by faith and not by sight. Christian faith, at its most basic foundation, rests not in our personal experience but in the Word and Work of God.

And what I mean by that – by the “word and work of God” – is very specific. I mean what God has done in human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth ... his birth, his life, his death, and the restoration and resurrection of his body to new life in his physical body. The story of Jesus is *the* defining element – the defining characteristic of Christianity – rooted in the reality of our world and not in some kind of wishful thinking that there's a cosmic butler out there somewhere.

As the Apostle Paul once put it in his letter to the Colossians:

*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.*

He existed before anything else,

and he holds all creation together.

*Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.
He is the beginning,
Firstborn over all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.*

*For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,*

*and through him God reconciled
everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross.*

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body.

As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

And then Paul ends his explanation of what God did in Jesus with this exhortation:

But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. Colossians 1:15-23 (NLT)

Never lose sight of Jesus and what God has done in him, Paul is saying. Take your stand in that, not in your circumstances; not in how you feel. Always come back to it. That's where you will find assurance.

And I will tell you personally, that if I didn't have confidence in what God has already done through Jesus of Nazareth – in his death, burial and resurrection – I don't know what I would do. Actually, I have a good idea. I'd be totally despondent. This is a crazy world. Quite frankly, I don't understand how people make it through this life without that faith.

But you don't have to because we can trust and continue to trust in what God has said and in what God has done. And next week, we'll talk about how to do that on a daily basis.

Until then, let me pray for you ... and then our band is going to do a song to give us some time to reflect what we've heard ... and then I have one more thing to share with you before we leave.

Let's pray.

<PRAYER>

Feature – “By Faith”

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. The Excellence Challenge Update

A reminder of what the “Excellence Challenge” is ...

From now through Christmas our goal is to raise \$165K to make our property and facility more “excellent” ... by giving over and above what we currently give to NHCC.

An example of what we’re talking about < pic of side>

You’ve seen this picture before, but this is the west side of our building and you can see it looks pretty dumpy. But it didn’t matter before there was a road here and a Drs. office going in next door. We’ve got to clean that up which means fixing the paint and the fence and the parking lot. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done here to lift the level of excellence.

I said I would keep you up to date on that every so often.

Here's the current status.

Excellence Challenge Status as of 10/13/14

Goal	\$165,000
Given	\$8,121 (5%)
Remaining	\$156,879

If you’d like to contribute between now and Christmas, you can write a check with “Excellence Challenge” in the memo line or you can go to the giving section of our website (giving tab) and fill in the excellence challenge box with whatever amount you would like to give.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/faith-in-faith-or-faith-in-god-11599047.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip/2012/04/12-04-14-1/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-6266/>

^{iv} See <http://accurmudgeon.blogspot.com/2010/04/darren-marks-on-mind-under-grace.html>

^v Mohler, Christian Post

^{vi} Darren Marks