

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today is the last Sunday in our *First Things First Campaign*. During the past two months, I've shared with you the best information about the most important matters in human life that I personally know. The issue now is this. What will we do with that information? All of us have two options before us in that regard. Act on it or ignore it.

One factor more than any other will determine which of those we do. I call that "the first factor" and it's what I'm going to preach about today. We see it here in Galatians 2:15-20.

## **HAVING FAITH IN JESUS**

In this passage, Paul calls us to do two things. The first is found in verses 15-19. Have faith in Jesus. Let's go through these verses.

In verse 15, Paul observes something about the Jewish Christians to whom he's writing. They had tried to keep the Old Testament law and thus hadn't committed the grosser sins of the pagan Gentiles.

Nevertheless, he reminds them in verse 16, they had not been "justified" or saved by keeping the law. They had been instead by "having faith" in or "believing" in Jesus. That teaches us two things.

First, it teaches us what doesn't save us – our good works. I met a hospital volunteer at St. Elizabeth's. *"I volunteer,"* she said, *"because I enjoy people and want to get points with God."* She's misinformed of course. Verse 16 and many others make it clear. Our good works don't get us points with God. They don't save us.

Verse 16 teaches us a second thing – what does save us. It's having faith in Jesus. It's believing in Him. The verse says it both ways. That means that we're convinced that Jesus is a living and divine being who is right, who is the greatest and best. And because He is, we entrust and abandon our person and life to Him. We decide to be His disciple. That is what saves us – having faith in Jesus.

According to verses 17-19 though, that doesn't mean that we can

ignore the law, God's commands, and do whatever we want. One young man I knew years ago claimed just that. He made a profession of faith in Jesus but continued having pre-marital sex just like he always did. He contended that faith in Jesus makes the law irrelevant. If keeping it doesn't save us, he argued, then not keeping it doesn't unsave us. But he's wrong. Those who have saving faith in Jesus, just because they do, will try to know and keep the law. The law isn't the source but it is the course of our salvation. That's Paul's point in verses 17-19.

So that's the first thing that he calls us to do. According to verses 15-19, we must have faith in Jesus.

## **HAVING THE FAITH OF JESUS**

The second thing that he calls us to do is to have the faith of Jesus. You can see that in verse 20. This verse contains one of the most celebrated declarations in the Bible, *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."*

In his commentary on Galatians, Alan Cole explains what that means: *"It stands for a complete change in Paul's way of looking at things - a 'reorientation of thought,' to use modern jargon."* You can see that this is not about having faith *in* Jesus. It's about having the faith *of* Jesus. We totally identify with Him in His beliefs. We share His beliefs. We believe what He believes in other words.

Take money for instance. Jesus has a set of beliefs about money. He believes, for instance, that generosity is measured by how much we keep not how much we give. To have the faith of Jesus means that we believe what He does about money.

Those then are the two things that Paul calls us to do. Have faith in Jesus and have the faith of Jesus. Together, they reveal what I call the progression of discipleship. That progression is this. To *become* a disciple of Jesus, we must *believe in Him*. To *develop* as a disciple, we must *believe what He believes*. To *enter* the kingdom of heaven, we must *believe in Him*. To *be at home in* the kingdom of heaven, we must

believe what He believes. Simply put, disciples progressively move from having faith *in* Jesus to having the faith *of* Jesus.

## **KNOWING VERSUS BELIEVING WHAT JESUS BELIEVES**

That implies us something that all of us need to grasp. It isn't enough to know. We have to believe as well.

Let's think about our educational system. That system focuses on knowing not believing. I remember answering an evolution question correctly in my high school biology class. I knew the right answer to the question but certainly didn't believe it. Every teacher I've ever had told me that I had to know the right answers. But not one ever told me that I had to believe those answers. I've never heard of a teacher lowering someone's grade because he or she gave the right answer but didn't believe it. In our educational system, we only have to know not believe.

But that isn't the way it is in the kingdom of heaven.

Don't get me wrong. We do need to know the right answers. By right answers I mean the truths that Jesus and the Bible reveal to us. Remember that a disciple is one who tries to learn all that Jesus teaches. To learn is to know. So we need to know the right answers.

That's what I've tried to do the past two months - give you right answers. Let me give you a little quiz to see if you know them. Fill in the blanks. In John 10:10, Jesus says that if we follow Him He will give us abundant life. God is the only utterly lovely and utterly competent being in the universe. God is more important than what He created. The Bible does not make a distinction between Christians and disciples. In order to love God, we must understand and know Him. A primary activity in knowing God is to practice His presence. To make our body our slave, we must practice spiritual disciplines. The self is formed not found.

That quiz illustrates that we do need to know the right answers. We do need to know the truths that Jesus and the Bible reveal to us.

But in the kingdom of heaven, it isn't enough just to know the right answers. We must believe them as well. That's what having the faith of

Jesus is all about. We not only know but also believe the right answers.

I once talked with a long established Christian, for instance, about a right answer – abundant life. I defined for him in detail what that life is like. The word he then used in response was “unreasonable.” To expect that kind of life is unreasonable, he said. Suppose I ask him to fill in the blank. In John 10:10, Jesus promises to give us abundant life. He would fill it in correctly because he knows the right answer. The problem is that He doesn’t believe it.

I say “problem” because in the kingdom of heaven, it isn’t enough to know the right answers. We must believe them as well.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BELIEVING WHAT JESUS BELIEVES**

And here’s why. It’s because we always live up or down to our beliefs. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Here’s simple calculation.  $1 + 1 =$  what? The right answer of course is “2.” In reality,  $1 + 1 = 2$ .

Let’s suppose that we believe that. So, we go to the dollar store, pick out two items, and pay the cashier the \$2 that they actually cost. Acting on our belief helps us. So, we’re living up to our belief.

Now let’s suppose that we don’t believe that. We believe instead that  $1 + 1 = 3$ . So, we go to the dollar store, pick out two items, and pay the cashier \$3 instead of the \$2 they actually cost. Acting on our belief harms us. So, we’re living down to our belief.

That shows why we need to know the right answers. It’s because our beliefs are the rails upon which our lives run. We always act consistently with what we truly believe. If our beliefs are true, we act according to reality, to things as they are, and are helped. We live up to our beliefs. But if our beliefs are false, we act contrary to reality, to things as they are, and are harmed. We live down to our beliefs. Our beliefs, in other words, determine how poorly or well our lives go.

I speak from plenty of experience in saying that. Take fasting for instance. The reality is that fasting is essential to our spiritual lives.

For almost all of my life, I believed that it isn't. That is a false belief and I lived down to it. I didn't fast and was harmed. I missed out on its benefits that I shared two weeks ago. But now I believe that it is essential to our spiritual lives. That is a true belief and I'm living up to it. I'm fasting and being helped. I'm experiencing its benefits. I'm closer to God, have more self-control, and worry less as a result of it.

That explains why we need to have the faith of Jesus. All of his beliefs are true. Consequently, if we share them, we'll act according to reality and be helped. We'll live up to our beliefs. But if we don't share them, we'll act contrary to reality and be harmed. We'll live down to our beliefs. So, have the faith of Jesus.

## **HOW TO BELIEVE WHAT JESUS BELIEVES**

But how do we do that? I've told you many times before that we can't choose to believe something. Believing is a Holy Spirit driven process instead. What happens is that we go through the process and the Holy Spirit eventually gives us the gift of faith as we do. So go through the process of believing. That process involves doing three things.

First, we identify the beliefs of Jesus. There's only one way I know of to do that. We have to read and study Scripture. That's because Scripture tells us quite specifically what His beliefs are. Everything I told you the past two months is a product of me doing that. I studied Scripture and identified the beliefs of Jesus. I then shared those beliefs of His with you.

I said, for instance, that you and I should fast. I didn't say that because I believe we should. I said it because Jesus believes we should. I identified that belief of His by studying Scripture, specifically Matthew 6:16-18 and Luke 5:35. Those passages make it clear beyond any doubt. He believes that His followers should fast.

The process of believing involves doing a second thing. We understand the beliefs of Jesus. We do that by prayerfully and carefully examining them. We learn the in's and out's of them by reading what the

Bible and others teach about them. We also listen to the testimonies of those who experience them.

That's what I did with fasting. I tried to understand it. I read or listened to what the Bible and others taught or testified about it. One man testifies for example: *"I come back from the fast with a clearer sense of purpose and a renewed sense of power. The anger which I unleashed against my wife and children was less frequent and the materialism that was squeezing the life out of my spirituality had loosened its grip."* Testimonies like that, in conjunction with what I read about fasting, helped me understand why and how we should do it.

There's a third thing that the process of believing involves. We experiment with the beliefs of Jesus. Once we identify and understand them, we then interact with or try them out. We try to experience them. The first two things we do are secondhand. This third thing is firsthand.

I experimented with fasting for instance. I decided to do it for three months and see what happens. I'm in the process of that right now. I can tell you though that I'm going to continue doing it after the three months. That's because my belief has already changed. I once believed that fasting isn't essential to our spiritual lives. I now believe that it is. What happened? I initiated the process of believing and the Holy Spirit has given me the gift of faith. I now believe what Jesus believes about fasting.

## **CONCLUSION**

What I've done with fasting, I try to do with all the beliefs of Jesus and so should you. Identify, understand, and experiment with the beliefs of Jesus. The Holy Spirit may very well give us the faith of Jesus if we do. We'll then believe what Jesus believes if He does.

And that is the first factor. What we believe, more than anything else, determines whether we act on or ignore what Jesus says. What we believe, more than anything else, it determines whether do or don't put first things first.