

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

Lesson Three

Faith

Focal Text

Proverbs 3:5-6; Galatians 2:15-21; Ephesians 2:8-10

Background

Proverbs 3:5-6; Galatians 2:15-21; Ephesians 2:8-10

Main Idea

Disciples come to Jesus through faith and live by faith.

Question to Explore

Have I come to Jesus through faith and am I living by faith?

Quick Read

We receive Christ by faith – and we are to live by faith. We place our trust in God for salvation. We must also place our trust in him daily as we follow him in obedience.

Introduction

As we continue to consider the habits of disciples, faith comes to the fore. What exactly is faith? I once heard Grady Nutt, the great Baptist comedian say, “Faith is the ability to walk through a tall field of grass in the summertime without contracting a single chigger.” On occasion I have wished for that kind of faith, to no avail. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. The writer goes on to say that it is impossible to please God without faith.

In the New Testament the words “faith” and “believe” are the noun and verb forms of the same word. If I have faith I believe and if I believe I have faith. Unfortunately in our day

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it has been limited to mean something like cognitive assent. True, I have to know the truth to believe. But faith entails more because it expresses our absolute confidence in the object of our faith. In fact, the word “trust” is a synonym for the idea of faith. So faith is the knowledge of, and assent to; the truth. We can trust the truth because the truth is trustworthy. We rely on God because he is reliable and depend on him because his dependable. So I trust the chair I am sitting on and I put my whole weight down.

As a freshman in college seeking to clarify God’s call in my life to pastor, I memorized Proverbs 3:5-6 as I asked for God’s direction in my life. I felt called to be a pastor and was preparing to submit my resumes to churches. At the same time I was dealing with the relationship issues which confront so many college students and young people in their late teens.

Commentary

Trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Solomon reminds us that the Lord is the object of our trust. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. So trust involves a commitment on our part. One cannot trust from the sidelines. When we trust, we go all in.

In that same year in college I heard Ron Durham, the pastor of Columbus Avenue Baptist Church, tell about the tightrope walker who traversed a cable suspended above Niagara Falls. Having made it across, he proceeded to put a wheelbarrow on top of the cable and go across. By this time a substantial crowd had gathered. He asked them if they believed he could make it across the falls pushing a wheelbarrow. One vocal spectator affirmed his confidence in the tightrope walker. “You can do it.” The entertainer responded, “Get in the wheelbarrow.” Christian faith must mean more than simply believing in God. We must trust him enough to place our whole lives at his disposal.

The contrast to trust in the Lord is to put our confidence in our own understanding. In this day of information explosion and acquisition, this would seem to be the way to go. We know the importance of making an informed decision. But the writer of Proverbs knew that our own understanding is limited. Our minds are finite, but our God is infinite. Nothing limits him.

Sometimes my best understanding has led me astray. A friend of mine who counsels high school students says about the trouble they get into: “their best thinking got them there.” Many adults fall into the same trap of depending exclusively on their own understanding.

Instead of trusting our own knowledge, we acknowledge God. This word speaks of a close and deep personal relationship with God. We do not just give a nod toward God and his presence and purpose. Instead we welcome his wisdom and will because we know who he is. Our knowledge of God is first-hand because we love him.

Years ago I saw a picture of a woman standing in the rubble of her former home after a severe earthquake in Greece. She had lost everything, but this wonderful Christian lady lifted her eyes heavenward with the deepest confidence. She was not happy about what had happened, but she was turning to God and trusting the only One who could change her circumstances. This is what it means to acknowledge God. And we do so in all of our ways.

Our gracious God rewards our trust in him by giving us direction. He alone can make our paths straight. He will lead us in the right way. “Crooked,” in this context, has a moral implication. It is akin to our use of the English cognate “crook.” If we follow crooked paths we are deceitful and being deceived. But to go straight is to go in God’s way. When we trust God he will direct our steps in ways that lead us closer to him as his disciples. So Proverbs 3:5-6 lay a foundation upon which the New Testament writers build.

Saving Faith (Galatians 2:15-21)

The Apostle Paul amplifies this thought in his letter to the Galatians. He has just described a titanic struggle with Peter. These two men were the “heavyweights” in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles. Peter’s activity dominates the first part of Luke’s history of the early church and Paul’s story fills the last half of the book.

When Paul arrived in Galatia, Peter was receptive to fellowship with the Gentile believers. But when the Judaizers (a sect of Christians who expected Gentiles to behave in traditional Jewish ways and observe the Old Testament law) arrived, Peter changed his tune. Out of fear of this “circumcision group” Peter separated from the Gentile believers. He became standoffish toward the Gentile believers treating them as second-class citizens in the kingdom.

Peter’s hypocrisy became contagious leading even a stalwart leader like Barnabas to follow in his steps. Imagine this cataclysmic collision. Paul confronted Peter with his illogical behavior. Though a lifelong Jew, he now lived as a Gentile. Why would he or anyone else require lifelong Gentiles to live as Jews? It made no sense.

Paul responded to Peter and the Judaizer’s rationale for their mistreatment of the Gentile believers. The Judaizers likely would have claimed, “we are Jews and not Gentile sinners.” Paul answered with a clear explanation of the good news. We are not justified or made right with God by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

In a recent sermon, Tim Keller provided excellent examples of the way people in our culture “justify” their existence. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, one of the protagonists, Harold Abrams explained how his whole life was wrapped up in winning a race. “I have ten seconds to justify my existence.” Similarly, Sydney Pollack (the filmmaker) continued to work even though he was very ill, because from his point of view each time he made an excellent movie, he “justified” his presence in the world. How do we justify our existence? Paul argued that ultimately, one cannot be justified by keeping the law.

The whole idea of justification envisions a court room in which God rules that we are not guilty. Paul confronts the hypocrisy. As believers we must not take God's grace for granted. Instead we die to the idea that the law can save us so that we might live to God. Out of our great gratitude for God's saving grace, we choose to use our freedom from the law not to continue in old patterns of sin, but to live transformed lives. Instead of obeying God because of external commandments, we are motivated by the presence of the Holy Spirit living within us.

What does Paul mean, "I have been crucified with Christ..."? At first glance Paul's words in Galatians 2:20 may seem too mystical and mysterious to us. Remember that Paul saw believers in a very special union with Christ which he often characterized as being "in Christ" or having "Christ in you." So Paul saw the crucifixion of Christ not only as an historical event, but as a part of his own personal experience. Believers were crucified with Christ. We died to sin including the gratuitous self-centeredness of believing we could save ourselves. Christians have died; nevertheless we live because Christ lives in us.

And how do Christians who have been united with Christ in his death actually live? "By faith," Paul's words resound. The same faith which saves us also strengthens and sustains us in the Christian life. So we trust in Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us. Our everyday life as believers is characterized by constant trust in the God who has given us life.

Perhaps we have heard of the frog who fell into the vat of milk and would have drowned but he kept swimming until he churned the milk into butter. Once it was solid, he jumped out. This can be a picture of the way many western Christians view our faith. Another generation expressed it in the colloquialism, "God helps those who help themselves." If we just keep going it will work out. Try harder. *The gospel is not, "try harder to do better," but trust wholly in the cross.* How then do Christians actually do good things? By faith in our faithful Father we are inspired to work.

Created in Christ to Do Good (Ephesians 2:1-10)

Paul's clearest exposition of the triad of Christian words "salvation," "faith," and "grace" comes in his letter to the Ephesians. In fact in Ephesians 2:1-10 Paul's entire argument is rooted in the concept of grace or God's unmerited favor. Paul painted a dark portrait of our pre-Christian state in Ephesians 2:1-3. Before Christ we were dead in our trespasses and sins, under the influence of the prince of the power of the air. Our lust and desires were out of control and we faced the wrath of God against those sins.

Paul explodes this desperate situation with two powerful words, "But God . . ." (Eph. 2:4, NASB). God's mercy and great love made us alive with Christ by grace and raised us up with him. So the Christian is not only crucified with Christ but raised and ascended with him. We have gone from the depths to the heavens, all by God's unmerited favor.

Understanding grace is essential to Christian growth. In v. 5 Paul says, "...by grace you have been saved." Again in v.7 he contends that believers are trophies of God's grace shown clearly in the work of Jesus Christ. Now he clarifies in v. 8, "...by grace you have been saved, through faith." When he says and "this not from yourselves," we are tempted to think he is speaking only of faith. Theologically this is accurate. Our ability to trust comes from God. But faith is a feminine noun and Paul uses the neuter gender here.

Perhaps Paul contends that the whole experience of salvation is not something we have done, but it is the gift of God in whom we trust. We cannot earn God's favor so we cannot boast about receiving it. In heaven we will not boast of our own accomplishments in getting there.

The story is told of a man who arrives in heaven and St. Peter meets him at the gate and says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!" "Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service." "Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point." "One point? How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says. "TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!" "Come on in!"

Saving faith is receiving and resting in Jesus Christ alone.

Augustus Toplady expressed it in his great hymn, "Rock of Ages."

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

God's grace not only saves us but also empowers us to do good for God. What role then do works play in the Christian life? Works become the evidence and confirmation that we have received new life. So we do not earn salvation by fulfilling good works or works of the law, but instead we demonstrate the reality of salvation by doing good after we are saved.

Paul uses beautiful words to characterize the new life of salvation. Not only is it resurrection from death but regeneration and re-creation to life. We are God's workmanship – his *poiema* – his poem or masterpiece. God made us and created us in Christ Jesus. This is salvation. This is salvation with a purpose: "for good works." Even before God saved us he wanted us to work for him and walk in them.

Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, a young man in Mount Holly, New Jersey, opened a humble tailor shop. Unlike other businessmen, John Woolman refused to purchase any cotton or dye supplies handled by slaves. His commitment to Christian love with excellence attracted customers in droves, despite occasions when he could only offer them beige sackcloth. In 1759 Woolman convinced the Philadelphia Quakers to pass the first resolution in the American Colonies not to own, deal, or sell slaves. Why use God's blessings, he reasoned, to buy people captive to chains for personal profit?

More recently I heard a young woman named Jolene Damoiseaux tell her remarkable story. She went to college to prepare for medical school. Along the way to her degree from Baylor University, she discovered the extraordinarily high mortality rate of mothers in Kenya.

On a mission trip, she interviewed the young mothers in a village and discovered that they wanted to get to the hospital for a safer delivery but that the terrain and distance prevented them. Jolene returned to the U.S. searching for an answer to this dilemma. So she returned with \$1500 and founded "Mothers on the Move," a motorcycle taxi service which transports the mothers to the hospital to deliver their babies. These mothers and babies survive at a much higher rate than the the rest of the country.

This remarkable young woman hopes to become an OB/GYN physician so that she can go and make a difference in Kenya. What gives her this great compassion for people? Jolene is a follower of Christ. She is simply doing the good work that God prepared in advance for her to do. What good work did God prepare for us to do? Are we doing it?

God anticipated and foreordained that his people would do good works. Henry Blackaby put it this way: "God's commands are designed to guide you to life's very best. You will not obey Him, however, if you do not believe Him and trust Him. You cannot believe Him if you do not love Him. You cannot love Him unless you know Him."¹

Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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¹ Henry T. Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 22.