

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3;

"Faith in Action" part 1 - Hebrews 12:1-3; (part 12 in series)

BIBLICAL FAITH

We are coming towards the end of our series on Hebrews. Recall that the first ten chapters of Hebrews set forth the superiority and sufficiency of Jesus Christ in all matters of salvation and faith. In chapter 1, Jesus as the Son of God is superior to angels and is God in the flesh; in chapter 2, as the Son of Man, He does what no human can do and that is to serve as a perfect human sacrifice for sin. In doing so, He renders Satan's accusations against mankind as meaningless and therefore sets us from the bondage of sin and death. In chapter 3, Jesus is shown to be superior to Moses; in chapter 4, He provides a better rest than Joshua; in chapters 5 & 6, He is a better High Priest, and likewise the guarantee of a better covenant. In chapters 7-10 we find that Jesus presides in the heavenly or greater tabernacle with a better ministry. And He presents a better sacrifice, Himself! before God. All in all, the first ten chapters set forth Who Jesus is and What He has done for all mankind. And in the midst of these wonderful realities, we are also warned on several occasions not to fall away or neglect so great a salvation. All of these ten chapters set the stage for the human response. What should be our response to Who Jesus is and what He has done?

And so, what should be our response to such a great salvation and Lord? Chapter 11 tells us – Faith! In chapter 11, we are given the nature of faith - that it is certain confidence that the promises of God will come true because of Who God is and that there is an unseen reality and world that is even more real than the natural and seen world. Faith is not merely intellectual belief; it is an attitude of the heart that results in action. Hence, **Hebrews 11** also gives us a list of OT saints who by faith accomplished the will of God. But notice that they did not enter God's full rest because God was waiting for us – look now at **Hebrews 11:39-40**: ***"And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect."*** They could not be made perfect unless Christ came and unless we followed. *See what love the Father has for those who love them?*

Isn't that amazing? This is all part of God's plan. And we have a choice. We can live by faith and get on God's gospel ship, or we can doubt and not amount to much! For the reason faith is necessary is that it is how we understand God, it is how we please God and it is how we are rewarded by God.

Now that brings us to Hebrews chapter 12. If chapter 11 highlights the need for faith and that we should put it into action, chapters 12 and 13 show us what faith in action looks like. Let's now look at **Hebrews 12 beginning at verse 1** (note: we will not look at verses 4 -11 which deal with the discipline of the Lord and how God's love also includes tough love because I gave a sermon on this passage last summer).

Hebrews 12:1-3: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS

If we are going to put our faith in action, what is the starting and finishing point? Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is not only our Lord, He is our example. Now last time we looked at the keys to growing our faith. Remember the five keys? Knowing God’s Word, Focusing on Jesus, Being filled with the Spirit, Obeying the Lord, and being active in the Body with other believers. So in a sense those are all necessary if we are going to put our faith into action. But whereas being in the Word, or being filled with the Spirit, or being with other believers or even doing specific faith-related actions are done at different times and are not always constant, fixing our eyes on Jesus is to be always constant. In other words, He should always be in the forefront of all that I do, because I am in relationship with Him.

And He is the one who is there for you and me. He is the One who is our example. He is the One we are to always follow. So we are to fix our eyes on Him! That is how we get through the race of life. What are the two chief obstacles to our faith? Feelings and circumstances. Think about that for a moment. When things are going right, what is the first thing to be affected in us – our feelings, and the things that aren’t going right are our circumstances, right?

Remember what happened to the disciples when they were in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee? They saw Jesus walking on the water. The Bible says in **Mt. 14:26-33**, that they were terrified thinking they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus told them it was him and to fear not. **Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”** ²⁹**And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.** ³⁰**But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”** ³¹**Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”** ³²**When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.** ³³**And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”**

So what happened to Peter? Why did he begin to sink? He was able to walk on the water as long as He kept his eyes on Jesus, as long as he kept trusting the Lord. But as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink. When he took his eyes off the Lord, what was he seeing? The waves. What was he feeling? The winds. What was he thinking? This can’t be so. Why? He was letting the circumstances and the feelings that came with them to become the main focus.

You see, we are not to base our faith on feelings, we are to place our faith in the promises of God, and we aren't to trust in our circumstances, but in God Himself. It is why Paul wrote ***we don't look to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, ...we walk by faith not by sight. (2 Cor. 4:18, 5:7)*** This doesn't mean that we are blind to what is going on around us or that we ignore our feelings. No. What it does mean is that we don't allow them to control us. We don't let them define us. We don't let them stop us from trusting in the Lord.

Think about two main feelings that are part of our human experience – fear and bitterness. Fear comes because of our circumstances. Right? But what is the opposite of fear – courage. If you have courage, does that mean you aren't afraid? No. It simply means you are not going to let the fear rule you. It is moving forward despite the fear. As John Wayne used to say, *“Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway.”*

Or how about the feeling of bitterness? That comes from being hurt and allowing unforgiveness to take root. But God calls on us to forgive despite how we feel. We forgive by faith, trusting in God's mercy that it might actually flow through us.

The only way you can truly overcome the roller coaster ride of life's ups and downs is by fixing your eyes, trusting each and every day, in fact, every moment in Jesus Christ! So that is the foundation. Let's now look at some specific ways – some of the most important ways to put our faith in action.

PUT YOUR FAITH INTO ACTION

Heb. 12:12-17: *“Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; 16 that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.”

What is our purpose? To let our light shine! How so? To bring the healing love of Jesus; how do we bring the healing love? By seeking to build people up, to encourage others, to bring a sense of purpose and direction to people's lives, and to meet their needs. But this can only come if people first have peace with the Lord. So when we are told to pursue peace, it doesn't simply mean the absence of war or conflict. What it means is that we seek to show people how they can have peace with God.

And this can only come from having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Only in Him can we

have true purpose and peace. But here is the key that people often lose sight of – there can be no peace without the recognition of the holiness of God. That is what sanctification means – it is the process of becoming holy and righteous like God. Notice no one will see the Lord without it! When we recognize God’s holiness, we recognize our sinfulness. God’s holiness and love go together. You can’t have one without the other. And both are reconciled in the cross of Jesus. That is where the power of forgiveness comes in. We can forgive because of God’s mercy (love), but at the same time justice (holiness) is also dealt with in that a penalty is paid (the cross). So while the criminal will need to pay society for the worst of crimes, a restoration of the relationship is always to be sought out.

Otherwise, we will fall short of the grace of God by being unforgiving! The mark of a Christian is the commitment to keep short accounts and to be willing to look past the faults of others and still work for their good and the greater good of all people.

Heb. 12:16*that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.*

We are not to be ruled by our senses. This does not mean just when it comes to sexual sins but anything that pertains to the desires of the flesh. Esau sold the spiritual blessings that would come with his birthright and would also result in many temporal blessings just so that he could get his belly filled. Recall from **Hebrews 11**, Moses, how he was willing to forgo the temporary pleasures of sin for the reward of God. It reminds us of the ever battle we have with the temptations of the flesh. Man desires the blessing but despises the means whereby the blessing is to be gained. But God will never separate the means from the blessing, nor join the blessing with the satisfying of man’s lusts.

And to add further motivation, the writer of Hebrews says, ***“For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them.20For they could not bear the command, “IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED.”21And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling.” 22But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.”***

In other words, we are no longer under the Old Covenant; we are no longer under the judgment that the Law brings. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the fear and awe which Moses and the people of Israel experienced before the Lord at Mt. Sinai. No, we are now under the New Covenant which paves the way for us to come to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the place of angels, to God Himself, all because of what Christ has done. Our spirits have been made complete in Him; and as a result, our names are written on the rolls of heaven!

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 7, 2016, Liturgical Year "C"

So with such a great salvation, we are again reminded to not take what God has given us in Christ for granted!

Heb. 12:25: "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven."

Right now we are in the age of grace. But God's holiness and righteousness will not be mocked if one chooses to disobey.

***26*"And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." *27*This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. *28*Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; *29*for our God is a consuming fire."**

What should our attitude be? Not just one of faith and trust, but one of gratitude. When we are grateful, we recognize all the good in our lives and from where that good comes! When we are grateful, it means that we, in fact, are not taking things for granted. And when we are grateful, we show it not only in how we think but how we live. And to live for Christ means to seek and serve others. Faith in action means grateful obedience. Faith in action means knowing that we serve the King of Creation and that we seek first His kingdom and righteousness, for they are the only things that truly cannot be shaken! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!