

IS FAITH EASY?

Matthew 18

Picture this scene: A professor comes into the classroom and announces, “There is no need to take notes on any of the information I will give in this course. Just sit back, relax, and come to class. Don’t do any studying for the class.”

Or what about this situation: The student financial aid office sends you a formal letter saying, “We decided to increase your financial aid. Though you should only get \$1,500, we will pay your full tuition and all expenses this year.”

Then what about this scene: Your boss calls you into his office and announces, “You will only have to work half days now. You’ll get the same benefits plus a 5% pay raise, but go home for lunch each day and stay there.”

Maybe you have had pleasant dreams of something like this, but we have far more likely to have nightmares about going to class and not being ready for a test, not being able to afford another semester, or receiving a pink slip from the boss. I haven’t been to college since way back in the last century, but I still wake up in fear thinking I’m lost on campus. Life does not work as easily as those good dreams picture it. We would doubt if any of those situations would ever come true. You would feel a lot more comfortable taking a test from a professor after you had thoroughly studied for it. You would see a much better chance of getting financial aid when you did get a job. The financial aid office doesn’t give away money, but if you look hard for scholarships, you might find one. You will trust that you will get a full pay check and you will get all the due benefits when you have worked fulltime. In each of these situations it is a lot easier to believe when you have a role to play and if your efforts determine whether or not they come true.

That is why a relationship with God can seem so strange to us, Jesus says, “Whoever believes in Me has eternal life.” There is nothing we can do to gain a relationship with God; we can’t earn it or work for it. Instead, God calls us to trust that He has forgiven us and restored us to Him. There is nothing we can do for that; we simply accept what Jesus has done for us. We are saved by faith, not works.

Doesn’t that sound too simple? Everything we get in life—grades, salary, solid family life—these are all things for which we have to do some work. Football has started at Iowa State. No team at Iowa State will be able to win on sheer talent. They have to work for it. I don’t think that any of us would say that we could go to heaven on our own. We know we need God’s help. But it would seem a lot more comfortable for us to believe and accept the promise of heaven if we had to cooperate with God and that our part was important. But God simply says, “Trust in Me! Believe in Me!”

It reminds me of a kid I knew in high school named Frank. Frank lived for two things—spinning the wheels on his car while it was stationary (called “power braking”) and getting high on marijuana. I ask Frank what he thought about Christianity. He said, “Oh, I believe in Jesus. I figure there is a 50% chance He is true. Then I have a 50% chance of being saved. If I don’t believe, I have 0% chance, so I might as well believe.” But did he have a right relationship with God? Frank said he’d leave that up to God. He knew he couldn’t earn his way to heaven. But was his relationship with God genuine? Didn’t James say in his letter in the Bible, “Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead?”

I showed this summer a segment from the movie, “Martin Luther—Heretic” where Luther has discovered in the Gospel that we are saved by faith and is sharing it with his college students. They object by saying that if we are saved by faith, then we can do anything. Luther replies, “Yes, but what do you want to do? Steal a pig? Make faces at the duke? Spend the night in a whorehouse? If you have faith you live for God, not because you have to, but because that is what you are.” One student replies, “Then all it takes is faith.” “Yes,” Luther answers. Another student retorts, “But every peasant has faith.” “So,” says Luther. The student says, “Will heaven be filled with peasants?” Luther says, “Why not?” The student says, “That is too easy.” Luther replies, “Oh, you think faith is easy?”

Jesus shows us what it is like to have faith:

If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Taking up a cross does not mean a petty annoyance or a minor burden that we have to bear. It means what it meant in Jesus' day—carrying a cross up a hill so that you can be nailed on it and dying in the most hideous way. Is faith easy? Jesus puts it this way, "It is easy to be nailed to a cross?" Faith is a hard way, in fact the hardest way."

Faith is too easy if it means just going through the motions of saying to God, "I'll agree to say yes to You, God, if You save me." Real faith sees that God isn't interested so much in what we believe or do, but why we do what we do and why we say what we say. Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to save his life must lose it." If we believe just to get on God's good side and go to heaven, then that's selfish. Then I don't care about God; I just care about me. No matter what we think we believe, if we have that kind of attitude, then it is not faith. But Jesus also said, "Whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." When we trust Him, not for a reward, but simply because He is our God, then we have faith. Then we are depending on Him to bless and protect us. That what we believe and do is to serve Him, not "me."

Do we see how hard that is to do? Years ago I was driving along when I saw two cars collide. I stopped and thought for a while, "Should I do something about it?" I had nearly that same experience a month ago when driving in the mountains of western Maryland. A truck lost control, spun around, went through the guard rail, and flipped over on the other side of the highway. Both times I did stop to see if I could help. But both times I didn't do it because I wanted to. I had places to go. Yet I felt I had to do it. That is how impossible faith is not only that we trust in Christ to follow Him, but that we do it at all times willingly, because we want to. And we do it not for the selfish reason that we want heaven, but because we simply want to be with Him.

Faith is impossible. Yet, people have taken up the cross. Peter, who stood in Jesus' way to the cross when he said, "Let that never be!" later died up-side-down on a cross. Many other have died rather than deny Jesus. More did so in the 20th century than all others combined. But amazingly enough we too take up the cross and follow. Impossible? Yes it is! but true. It is because we take up the cross of Jesus.

Jesus' call to take up the cross doesn't just come out of the blue. First He told His disciples that He, "must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." What none of us could, Jesus did. He took up the cross willingly, not to gain anything for Himself, but to give all to us. It is to that cross, the cross He carried for us, that He calls us.

St. Paul adds more to that by reminding us that in baptism we died with Christ. In Baptism God nailed us to the cross with Jesus. We go with our sins to Calvary, taking up our crosses. We follow Him, not to get something for ourselves, but because we want to love Him as He has loved us. Faith is so hard that it is impossible. But in the cross of Jesus which becomes a part of us through baptism, the impossible is done. We have faith in Jesus.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
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