

The Life of Religion: Faith

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” – Mark 10:52

“Faith,” we read, “is an internal acknowledgment of truth.” In fact, it is “an acknowledgment that a thing is so *because it is true*. For he who is in real faith thinks and speaks to this effect: ‘This is true, and therefore I believe it.’ For faith is related to truth, and truth to faith. Moreover if he doesn’t comprehend a thing to be true he says, ‘I don’t know whether this is true or not, and therefore I don’t yet believe it. How can I believe what I don’t comprehend? It may possibly be false.’” (Faith #1-2)

In the discussion that follows these points we are reminded that even though religious faith involves spiritual and celestial things (which by definition can’t be observed with the physical senses) it is still possible to see and acknowledge the truths proper to these things. There is, however, one essential qualifier, and that is the way we choose to live. Again, we read,

“If anyone thinks within himself, or says to another, ‘Who can have that internal acknowledgment of truth which is faith? I can’t,’ I will tell him how he may have it: shun evils as sins, and approach the Lord, and you will have as much as you desire” (Faith #12).

Now this is interesting – for a lot of reasons. First of all it doesn’t say you must believe everything about the Lord, it says you must “approach” Him. And if you approach Him you will find that what He stands for is indisputably true and good. So then, if you can accept that evils, that is, any harmful or bad things, should be avoided because they are offensive to the very concept of truth and goodness (and not just because you might get caught, or because it’s not to your personal advantage), then the promise is that “you will have as much faith as you want.”

With this in mind, going back to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, we are reminded of the father’s plea for his son, who had been suffering convulsions since childhood. When the Lord said, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes,” the man cried out in tears, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!” (vv. 23-24). The point is that he “approached the Lord” with the certain knowledge that He had healed others: why not his own son? One way of interpreting this man’s plea is that he was saying his belief would be complete *if the Lord would heal his son*, which of course He did.

But what about us? Do we require miracles in order to have faith? We shouldn’t. In fact, the Writings for the New Church are clear that the new revelations about the spiritual world and the spiritual sense of the Word “surpass all miracles” because they have the power to enlighten our understanding *if we want to be enlightened*. (Coronis, summary, at the end, PTW, vol 1). Again, all we really need to do is shun evils as sins and approach the Lord, and we will have as much faith as we want. *So how much do we want?* How much does it matter to us? Can’t we just get on with our lives and be content to learn about spiritual things in the next life – if there is one?

The answer to this question is important. While it is true that natural miracles served to heal people and establish faith in the beginning of the Christian Church, the fact is that modern learn-

ing seriously interferes with that sort of healing and faith. It's just too hard for most of us to let go and let the Lord work on us. On the other hand modern learning is the very basis for *a deeper kind of faith* – one that reaches deep into our understanding and not just our material lives. On the strength of *this* faith we have a spiritual perspective that can either explain or provide meaning to *anything* that happens to us, whether we are physically well or not. In short it can make us *spiritually well*, which after all is a greater and more lasting gift than natural health, affecting everything and everyone around us.

Last week our topic was the life of charity toward the neighbor. Now we're considering the life of faith. So how exactly does faith affect our lives?

Well, in the first place, that is, initially, faith *doesn't* affect our lives, *our lives affect our faith*. When you read the book, *The Doctrine of Faith*, you will find that it is actually as much *or more* about charity than it is about faith, because without charity there is no faith. To get faith we have to be focused on shunning evil and doing good. Then if we look to the Lord He will inspire us with an understanding of His Word, which will *become* faith as we reflect on it.

But there's more – much more. Once we have that faith in what we understand to be true, it begins to *qualify* everything we do. Take, for example, the new knowledge and understanding, that is, the *faith* we can have in the laws of the Divine Providence – or the influence of spirits in our lives – or the spiritual sense of the Word. In each of these areas our faith in what the Lord has revealed can give us the framework for intelligent, prioritized decisions about what actions will serve the greatest spiritual good for the most possible people. In effect it can guide our footsteps even as it comforts and sustains us through the challenges and temptations we face in doing the right thing. It can inform us about and keep us mindful of the ultimate goal, that is, eternal life, and so strengthen our resolve when our day-to-day problems seem overwhelming.

Again, consider the new understanding we have of the Lord Himself and the Trinity of love, wisdom and power vested in Him. We don't spend a lot of time these days arguing with people about things like this, but it's important! If we believe God is in three persons, and one is sacrificing Himself to appease the wrath of Another then we not only have a dysfunctional idea of God, we have a God who endorses human sacrifice as a way of solving problems. But if we believe God, who is Infinite, assumes a natural human form in order to express His love and wisdom *in ways that empower us to take responsibility* for our own heavenly life then we have a faith that affirms our personal freedom and rationality, creates opportunities and provides encouragement to live well.

Further, if we consider that God came into this world in a natural human form in order to address the accumulated evils and falsities of human heredity *in Himself*, in His own inner battles of temptation, rather than imposing His will on other people, then we have an understanding, and thus belief or faith in a truly gracious and compassionate God who models behavior that would end all war, misery and deprivation if we would just accept His help and follow His example.

Last week we noted that the life of charity is organic. So is the life of faith. It grows and flourishes as we practice it, and it is strengthened as we experience its benefits. In fact, the mental and physical health benefits associated with the practice of religious faith have been documented in many scientific studies. But the main point here is that it provides for our *spiritual* health. Why? – Because it informs us of things we need to know in order to be healthy!

Here's a practical illustration. You all know that carbon monoxide gas can kill you. You also know that it is invisible and that you can't feel, smell or taste it. So you rely on *information* about the gas and how it works to maintain a safe environment. And you need to have faith in that information and take appropriate precautions or you can get really sick and die.

Here's another. You know that certain vitamins and minerals are essential for good physical health. And yet the effects of these nutrients take time to manifest and so there's an element of what you might call mystery in the process. In fact it has taken years of research in many cases to tease out the information that we need to understand the connection between, let's say, vitamin D and the proper absorption of calcium for strong bones. And the revelations keep coming: the most recent research shows a strong correlation between low levels of vitamin D with low blood pressure, diabetes and even various cancers. Similar things could be said about other trace elements necessary for good health: you need a certain faith or trust in the research because the cause and effect relationship between them and your health isn't always obvious.

Faith in what the Lord teaches is like that. You learn what you need to know from Him because, honestly, you'd never figure it out on your own; but you learn it because you want to have a good life, and when you apply it you find your life improves, and so your faith is strengthened.

Paul spoke about this in his epistle to the Hebrews when he said, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). By this he did not mean that we can't or shouldn't try to understand spiritual things, only that the substance of faith in the Lord is spiritual and so can only be seen with the eyes of the spirit, *that is, the understanding* (see Faith #10).

In a study of faith as mentioned in the Bible some curious things emerge. For example, the word, faith, is hardly ever mentioned in the Old Testament. Instead, from time to time we read about *faithfulness*, usually referring to the Lord, who's "faithfulness endures to all generations" (Ps. 119:90), meaning that His Word is unfailingly reliable. In contrast, as we can see throughout the Old Testament, the Jews of that time didn't have much faith OR faithfulness; quite simply they were blessed when they obeyed and cursed when they didn't.

But even in the New Testament faith is only mentioned 32 times in the Gospels and Revelation, often quoting the Lord Himself. In contrast there are well over 200 references in the Acts and Epistles. No wonder there is such an emphasis on faith in the traditional Christian Church. But the doctrines warn us not to be misled by an unfortunate misreading of these passages. Even in Romans 3:28 where Paul says, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith *apart from the deeds of the law*," the Writings observe that his reference was *not* to the commandments but to the statutes and ordinances having to do with sacrifices, diet, clothing, personal hygiene and so on. Paul himself makes this clear when he discounts the importance of circumcision, dietary restrictions and more while still stressing the necessity of good works.

There are actually some very wonderful statements in the Epistles about faith, especially throughout *I Timothy* and in *Hebrews*, chapter 11 and *James*, chapter 2. But even in *Romans* and *Galatians* the principle message is that we must not think we can earn our way into heaven by any merit of good works done for our own sakes. Rather, it is faith in the Lord that will inform and guide us in the life of charity and good works – for HIS sake, according to HIS Word. And in *I Corinthians* 13 Paul famously wrote, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not charity, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I

have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, *and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not charity, I am nothing.*” He goes on at length about this describing in detail what charity involves, concluding, of course, with these words: “And now abide faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

So, now, we are back again where we started: faith is of life, and the life of faith is charity toward the neighbor. It begins in charity and it ends in charity. Its whole purpose is to promote charity, which it does *by teaching what we need to know* in order to live right and be well, that is to be saved. And here’s an especially remarkable thing: in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, the Lord heals a paralytic who was carried by four men who let him down through the roof into the house where the Lord was teaching. And we read, “When Jesus saw *their* faith” He healed him. Note, THEIR faith, not his. After all, he couldn’t move on his own.

This is particularly instructive because it shows how our own faith, expressed in faithful actions toward others, can provide the opportunity for those others also to be made well. Of course, in the spiritual sense of the Word, those four men (actually just “four” since men are not mentioned in the Greek text) represent the conjunction of good and truth, with an emphasis on the conjunctive power of good (AE #384:2). So, like the distraught father whose son was epileptic, there is a part of us that may have faith even as another part needs constant help and reassurance. But more than this, our own faith can be an inspiration to others – as we all know from our experience of being affected by those who have inspired us.

Again, Paul wrote about this in his epistle to Timothy, referring to his own former life as a blasphemer, a persecutor and an “insolent man,” saying, “However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first (that is, most of all, by contrast) Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those *who are going to believe* on Him for everlasting life” (I Tim. 1:16).

Most of the time we don’t really know the effect we have on others (or if we do, we may not find out ‘til years later), but this much is certain: our attitudes, our faith and our charity – or lack thereof – do affect others, every day. There is a spiritual sphere that encompasses each one of us and one of the most useful things we can do for others is to be conscious of the impact it can have, whether it’s obvious or not. Just as our faith in the Lord can make *us* well, so like the story in Mark it can move others to places where *they* can feel the Lord’s healing power if they wish.

In our first lesson, it is notable that when the blind man called out to the Lord for help, there were many who told him to be quiet. But then, when Jesus called for the man, they encouraged him, telling him to “Be of good cheer.” In the original Greek these words actually mean, “Have confidence,” which is another way of saying, “Have faith!” So then with their encouragement he came to the Lord and promptly received his sight. For us, of course, this represents our spiritual sight, the sight of our understanding – and faith, that is, “the internal acknowledgment of truth *because it is true.*” How great would it be if we could all have the confidence to encourage one another in this way so that we can all be made spiritually well!

Amen.

Lessons: *Mark* 10:46-52 (with allusions to John 9)
 Children’s talk on what it means to receive sight
 Matthew 17:14-21 & NJHD #108-112:1