

Importunate Faith

Our scripture passage for today is given in Luke chapter 5. Turn there with me and read along beginning in verse 17.

¹⁷ On one of those days, as he (the Lord Jesus) was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. ¹⁸ And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. ²⁰ And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ²² When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" ²⁴ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins", he said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." ²⁵ And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. ²⁶ And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today." (Luke 5:17-26)

As we read and we study the precious words of this passage, I can recall some other familiar words of instruction that Jesus seemed to repeat often, saying, "he who has eyes to see and ears to hear, let him see and let him hear.

In this circumstance, God had very purposefully set the scene in place for another special miracle that Jesus would do, all of them being meaningful, but this one especially so. Some days earlier, He had healed the man who was "full of leprosy", showing to all who had been drawn to Him that He had powers and abilities beyond that of mortal men.

Here on this day, God had intentionally drawn the audience that He wanted to be there. How do we know that? We know that because of the one basic truth that we have been studying recently, the profound truth that Jesus gave when He said, "no one can come to me except my father draw them".

And that was so with this group gathered before Jesus that day. First, there was the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, God's especially chosen men who had been charged with learning and knowing the truths of the scriptures so that they could lovingly instruct the people, but who had sadly closed their eyes and their ears to the gospel Jesus was giving.

And their circumstance was such a sad one. Though these men were so very intelligent and highly educated, these truths of the gospel were completely incomprehensible to them. Completely beyond their knowing!

But why would that be so? Why could they not learn the true meaning of the gospel. It is as we have said on so many occasions from this pulpit. It was because the truths of the gospel are of a "Spiritual" nature and not of an "intellectual" nature.

And as the words of 1 Corinthians 2 plainly tell us, "Spiritual truths" are "spiritually discerned". And no amount of education and training can befit a person's mind to reach beyond the boundaries of the natural realm into the spiritual realm and gain that special spiritual discernment. One thing and one thing only can befit a person's mind to receive things of the spirit and that is "faith" through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

The simple truth is that no thought process or intellectual pursuit of "Spiritual Truth" is ever complete and effectual without the presence of the Holy Spirit and faith. Faith provides a kind of "hearing" that allows us to truly "hear" real truth, and a kind of "sight" with eyes to see "behind the scenes" all the precious and loving involvements of God as He works within all the matters of daily life, involvements that an unbelieving mind is completely unaware of.

And so, again, sadly these Pharisees and these teachers of the Law would sit there that day and listen, but not hear, see but not see who they really had in front of them. But nonetheless, the Holy Spirit still drew them to be there, so that they would be without excuse.

And sadly, just as with those Scribes and Pharisees, there are many people even this very day, who have been drawn by God the Father to be present in the pews of many of our churches across our lands, and who hear the words of the gospel being given by their preachers, but though they listen, they do not hear. Their hearts and their minds have not fully surrendered to the saving indwelling power and presence of the Holy Spirit. And so, seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear.

But thankfully, there were many there in that house that day that could see and could hear the truths of the gospel. And that was especially so as we observe the earnest desires and the behaviors of the friends of the paralyzed man. We can see that it mattered little the level of knowledge and intellect that they had as compared to the Scribes and the Pharisees. Those friends of the man had “faith”! And their simple faith was what it took to bring about a wonderful and miraculous healing for their friend. Verse 20,

²⁰When Jesus saw their faith, He said to him, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” (Luke 5:20)

Here in these words, Jesus is revealing something very special and mysterious about the precious gift of faith. First, that faith is not just a “thought” within our minds, it is also our behaviors. These words tell us that Jesus “saw their faith”. He not only knew these men’s thoughts, He “saw” their thoughts of faith being demonstrated in their behavior. That is an absolutely essential element of faith. Faith is never just a thought or a feeling, it is a demonstrated behavior.

Secondly, note here that Jesus does not mention the faith of the man who was crippled. These words seem to tell us that the primary reason that Jesus healed that man was because of the faith of the man’s friends. And that is a precious mysterious promise to you and me, a promise that if we have faith and exercise our faith in our prayers and behaviors for another person, our children or grandchildren, perhaps God will honor our faith and save our loved ones.

As for the Scribes and Pharisees present that day, they themselves probably had some measure of belief and faith. But it seems that their faith rested within their knowledge, their intellect and their training. But folks, there are realms of understanding that mere knowledge and intellect will never touch.

And here in these words, Jesus is clearly telling us that faith is an essential provision within our soul. Faith is the vehicle that miracles ride upon.

And note here also these words in verse 17,

And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. (Luke 5:17)

Folks, those are mysterious words. Are those words implying that on some occasions, “the power of the Lord to heal” was not always with the Lord Jesus? Strangely, it seems too. And no, I don’t understand it. But we are told a similar thing in another place in the gospels. In Matthew 13:58 we are told that Jesus

did not do many miracles and mighty works in the particular place He was in at that time because of the peoples unbelief.

Isn't that strange? That by our unbelief, we can actually hinder the Lord Jesus from doing His mighty works of power! Folks, that truth should serve as a warning to us about our unbelief, our lack of faith!

But thankfully, there was no such lack of faith in many of these people and so we can read the words,

And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. (Luke 5:17)

Praise the Lord!

So then again, "faith" is a mysterious essential element to the powerful works of the Lord Jesus, and also mysteriously, for the "power" within any "righteous" works that we might do.

Perhaps, had these very intelligent Scribes and Pharisees opened their hearts and minds to Christ that day, they would have quickly recalled the words of the Prophet Habakkuk, words that were taught to them in their schools and seminaries where God said that "The just shall live by faith". But unfortunately, those Scribes and Pharisees had no such faith and they languished in their short-sighted knowledge.

But with that being said, you and I must be careful not to so quickly cast stones at those men, because we also lack faith. In the rush of the matters of our day, it is not an easy thing for us to interrupt the natural flow of our intellectual thoughts and to invite in the element of faith.

Why would that be so? Why did those learned men then, and why do you and I now, have such difficulty in simply stopping and having faith, believing that God is powerfully at work in every circumstance of our life?

Perhaps it is because faith, by its very nature, is such an odd thing. Faith is, in every way, a "paradox." One preacher I heard speak on the "paradox of faith" described faith as being "a completely absurd" notion that somehow becomes a workable reality". Let me say that again so that we don't misunderstand. The preacher described the "Paradox of faith" as being "a completely absurd notion that somehow becomes a workable reality".

I like that definition because faith seems to be exactly that way, a "paradox", but a "paradox" that really can work its way out into reality by the power of the

Spirit of Christ working in it. Remember the definition given in Hebrews 11. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen".

Faith has that special ability to make those things and ideas and plans that are absolutely impossible, even absurd, somehow become real and present and possible. Faith makes those things that are only "hoped for" to really take place.

And that is plainly demonstrated for us here in the actions of the friends of this paralyzed man. As those dear men worked their way around the crowd gathered there that day, they were filled with hope for their friend. But beyond that hope, they also had a deeply held belief, and faith, that God can do anything, that God could, and would heal their friend.

And Jesus proved it to them that day. In healing their friend, God made their hope become real. Because "faith" really does make those things "hoped for" to become real.

But folks, as I said a moment ago, just having deeply held beliefs is still not quite enough. For belief to be worked out to completion, as with this healing, we must actually do something with that belief. For belief to become actual faith, it must be put into use, otherwise our beliefs simply remain there, unfulfilled.

Just as with the Levites, in the Book of Joshua, when they were preparing to carry the Ark of the Covenant across the Jordan River and enter into the Promised Land, they really believed. But until that moment when they first placed their foot into the Jordan River, the waters did not part.

That was the same kind of "step of faith" that these friends of the paralyzed man took. It was as those men made the personal effort to bring their friend to Jesus, and then to fight their way through the crowd, and then dig a hole in the roof and lower their friend down in front of Jesus, that was when "belief" and "hope" became the "faith" that brought about the healing of their friend.

And that is the special message that God has for you and me from these scriptures today. The message is that "simple belief" must be accompanied by "action" before it can become real "faith". And not just any action, but "persistent" "believing" action. The Bible uses a word that I don't often use, it is the word "importunate". To be "Importunate" implies a stubborn, and sometimes annoying persistence. That's the kind of "faith" that I want to have!

Note again the "persistent" even "stubborn" efforts on the part of these men. Verse 18,

¹⁸ And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. (Luke 5:18-19)

There was a great crowd present, gathered inside and also outside that house. And some of those people were probably in as dire a need as the paralyzed man, themselves having health problems that needed healing. And they too wanted to get as close to Jesus as they could get, hoping for Him to do a miracle with them.

And that is an instruction and a warning for you and me as we make our efforts to draw up near to the Lord. There are many who will block our efforts to draw near to Christ, some of them intentionally, but most of them unintentionally. Most people are simply too caught up in their own needs to stop and invite you and me to go on ahead of them.

But whatever the reason might be, you and I will often find ourselves at the “back of the line”. We know that Jesus is up there ahead of us somewhere, but try as we may, the obstacles, the people, our work schedule, our health, our money, our time, or the circumstances, all seem to work to keep us from drawing nearer to Christ.

And intermingled within it all are the powerful forces of the “world, the flesh and the devil”, ever and always working against us.

But these friends of the paralyzed man had the answer, it was “stubborn persistence”, “importunity”. Folks, “persistence” is an absolutely essential element of faith.

God is good and He does good. But for reasons often unknown to us, there are times when God knows that it is far better for us to continue in our stubborn persistence.

Recall the circumstance when, as the disciples were trying to heal a diseased person, their efforts failed, and they asked Jesus why that was so. Jesus told them that, on some occasions, some healing comes only with prayer and fasting.

Persistence is something that you and I are not always good at. Yes, we might stop and pray and ask God for His answers, His blessings, His healing, but when

His answer doesn't come immediately, we get confused, anxious, even impatient.

But if we will carefully examine the words about prayer in Philippians chapter 4, we will find that God does not always promise immediate answers. Listen to those words!

6Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God; 7and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

God wants you and me to be confident in Christ rather than confident in His immediate answers. He wants our faith to become real "trust", and then for us to "wait" upon His provision.

The Christian writer, John Piper wrote that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him". Are we satisfied that God truly is good and that He will do good for us in every circumstance, no matter how that circumstance may appear? Are we satisfied that He will do that which is best for us, and that His wisdom and His timing are better than our own?

Folks, there are always more factors at work in every situation than just our own. There are other people, and their needs, their behaviors, and even our own behaviors that factor into God's timing. God takes all matters into consideration as He answers prayer. The thing that God requires of you and me is "faith", faith that is carried out by unyielding, often stubborn persistent "trust". Listen as we close!

6Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God; 7and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

May we pray.