

Faithful, Following Firstfruits

Prominent Traits of True Christians

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As I have mentioned a few times over the years, I had one of those discouraging exchanges over social media that happens every once in a while. (This was in the past week.) I remember several of these types of "discussions" (and I want to make sure you see that in quotes because they usually do not stay at discussions), back in the nineties—92, 93, 94—after the break up of the Worldwide Church of God, and they would get quite heated. And this one last week reminded me a little bit of those exchanges, but not quite so heated.

But back in the 90s, those of us supporting the traditional understanding of the church found very quickly that we could not persuade those reveling in the freedom of their new understanding to return to the old ways. Nothing we could do, nothing we could say, could sway them. And it came down to a simple fact of why, why we could not do it. They no longer believed. But most of all (I will put it just into this little category), they no longer believed in the sanctity of the Word of God. Little that God said between the covers of this Book here was valid to them anymore. They really did not believe it. They believed what they wanted to believe and kind of just threw the rest over their shoulders.

Last week, I was reminded of the futility of these types of theological debates. The Facebook post that started it was a woman's actually very beautiful recognition of her husband's loving actions toward her. She was commending him for not just any kind of romantic thing like bringing her a rose or taking her out to dinner or anything. She was talking about all the practical little things that he would do for her: make her coffee in the morning, fill her car up with gas, being handy around the house and fixing things. And actually more than that. (I know this couple.) He has done whole rooms, he has refurbished whole rooms, he is very handy. And he would do gallant and romantic things as well on top of that. And she was just publicly expressing how much she appreciated that.

She remarked in this comment that these loving deeds that she saw from her husband pretty much every day, made her respect him even more. Now, those two words are very important, loving and respect. And I thought her recognition of these things in her husband was wonderful, and on Facebook you like their post, you say, hey, this is good.

Well, then I went into the comment section, which was a mistake (I will admit it here right now), and I mentioned Paul's instruction to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5. Now I will tell you what I wrote. Here is the actual quotation of my post here. I wrote:

Ephesians 5 tells husbands to love their wives, while wives are told to respect their husbands. I've often thought that these specific words are used because those are the things each needs to learn to do and which each one generally has the most problems doing.

So men are told to love their wives. This is what they need to do for their wives. But it is the hardest thing for men to do consistently and well. And on the other hand, women are told to respect their husbands. They need to learn how to respect their husbands. They need to do this because that is what their husbands need from them.

That is what I meant. I do not know if I expressed it that way, but I just was trying to do a shorthand. Maybe that was my problem. But I thought this was actually commending them for their being good examples of this truth, that they were shining lights of her respecting him and him loving her. I thought that was great. But what I thought was an innocent statement turned into fighting words. Anything that has to do with the relationship between men and women is off limits from here on out. I will not do it again.

Now, the response that made me shake my head and throw up my hands in frustration and just leave it all at that point, came from a woman that I went to Ambassador College with back in the 1980s. It was discouraging to see where her thinking had gone over the past 20 years or so since we were in school back in the eighties. I assumed that we were on the same page theologically. But my assumption was far off base. The heart of her reply was this, I just pulled this one sentence out.

"The linguistic, stylistic, and theological evidence from the Pauline Corpus indicates that whoever wrote Ephesians, it was likely not Paul, but a later Christian who was familiar with Paul's letters and who relied heavily on Colossians [and in parentheses she writes] (also possibly not authentic Paul)." [She then said as part of her comment that the writer, whoever it was, not Paul], "wrote the epistle to promote and defend hierarchy."

In essence, what she was saying back to me in terms of I was just kind of quoting off the top of my head what Paul said about husbands and wives, was, no, the epistle to the Ephesians should not even be there because it is not apostolic, and besides that, it was written by a male chauvinist as a feminist screed to put women down. That was her take. She had gone totally feminist on this and anything that was against her feminist freedoms that the Bible said was out and she would find a way to discredit that text.

Do you see what she did here? In order to avoid the clear instructions from God through Paul, which we believe, she gave herself a pass and she did this by simply declaring on the authority of some *unnamed* scholars, they were probably critical deconstructionists, the postmodernist types who just tear everything down and take out of it what they want, that the epistle to the Ephesians did not have any apostolic authority, and in fact, as I said, was an anti-woman screed just trying to keep women down under men's thumbs.

In other words, she can believe anything that she wants to by doing this. All she has to do is, because to her the Bible has no authority, when Scripture says something she does not agree with, she can just find a scholar to discredit the text. That is all she needs to do. Find some error in there that she and this one scholar no one else sees and say it is not from God. And so she just chucks that part of the Bible out the window. And, I hate to use this example, but Thomas Jefferson did the same thing with the gospels. He essentially wrote his own by excising anything in the gospels that showed Jesus—as God—doing miraculous things. He did not think they were possible. He just took them right out. And now we have the Jefferson Bible, which is significantly shorter in the gospels than than ours.

But that is what people do. They get this big head thinking they are better than God, better than the apostles, better than the traditions of Christians down through the ages, and they begin to just pick and choose whatever they want because we know more now, we understand more now. And it is really stupid.

I was thinking about this the other day. Okay, the church back in the first, second, third centuries were a few decades, a century or so away from the originals. They had a better grasp of what was going on. They knew Greek. They had so much more understanding of what was happening in those scriptures. And here we are, 2,000 years later, we do not know Greek, not like they knew Greek. Even if we take Greek, we do not know Greek like they knew Greek because they were speaking it every day. It was the language that they grew up with, the language they learned in the cradle.

But we have scholars(!) who have gone to school and they can peer back through the mist of 2,000 years of history, and they *know* better than these people back in the first and second centuries. What is canonical and what is not because they have a few more manuscripts that they can compare.

It is just absolutely baloney. It is intellectual vanity to the max, as we said in the 80s. It is terrible to see and once you understand some of these things, the way they think, the way these critical scholars think, you could see right through their arguments. But a lot of people think that those arguments are valid and it is because they do not believe the Bible, they do not believe God. And of course, they do not have a calling so they do not have the spiritual tools to believe.

Put another way, my friend from college has no faith, or I should put it this way, since she has no faith in the Word of God, she essentially has no faith in the God of the Word. If you do not believe the Bible, you do not believe God because that is the way He has chosen to reveal Himself and His way of life to us. If we chuck the Bible, we are chucking God. It is that simple. If we chuck any part of the Bible, if we pick and choose, if we add or subtract, which we are told many times not to do, we are essentially doing that to God because He is revealed in His Word—Romans 10:17, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God."

You see, there is a linkage there. Faith comes because we hear and it is important what we hear. What we hear comes from the Word of God. So the Word of God reveals it and someone like me or another teacher, or your own eyes seeing it from the Bible, or your own ears hearing it, we hear it and from that hearing, from that learning and studying, you grow in faith. You come to believe.

I would like to read a short paragraph from *Kaufman's Bible commentary on Romans 10:17*. James Burton Kaufman was a Church of Christ pastor for many years, a commentator out of Houston, I believe, who writes a very good modern conservative commentary. Anyway, Kaufman says,

The only thing capable of producing faith in human hearts is the word which receives its authority from God and has as its subject the life and work of Jesus Christ, together with all of his teachings through the apostles. And anything that reduces, obscures, or replaces the word of God in men's preaching must be hailed as counterproductive. It is what God has revealed which alone can carry conviction to the human heart, and one can only deplore the amazing scarcity of Bible references in modern pulpits. It is precisely in that omission that the widespread unbelief of this generation originates.

And of course, we could say that in terms of taking what is in God's Word and twisting it into something that it does not say.

Now, most nominal Christians would assert very vigorously that they believe in God. You go to any Christian on the street and ask him, do you believe in God? And they would say, yes, absolutely! What they mean is that they believe God exists, they believe He is there. And you know, you could always say, well, the demons believe and tremble. But you understand that their belief is very limited. They are saying that God exists. And, I will give them this: They may believe in various aspects of His nature and His character. Predominantly in American Protestantism, they believe in God's grace and they believe in an aspect of His love. And they may believe in things like His omnipotence and His omniscience and various other traits that we automatically ascribe to God.

So they profess that they believe in God, that they believe He is there and that He is a kind, benevolent Being, and they believe that they have been saved by His grace. But—there is always a "but" after all of these things because they never go far enough—their profession of faith in God does not include faith in His Word or *complete* faith in His Word. Many of them have basically taken the Old Testament right out of their Bibles. And of course, there are certain parts of the New Testament they do not like either, but they do not have complete faith in His Word.

How do I know this? How do I know that they do not have complete faith in His Word? Well, it is very simple. If they did, if they had complete faith in God's Word, they would believe the Bible and follow it. And because they are not following it, I know they do not believe it, because that is the next step. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." Turn that around, the Word of God is spoken and we have faith, faith is generated in us. But they never take it any farther because the next step is doing what you believe and they are very scant in the doing. They do not do it very much.

Are they here with us today? If they believed the Word of God, they would be keeping the Day of Pentecost. There are some that do. Most do not. They will recognize it. They call it Whit Sunday and they baptize people on this day. That is partially what this day is about, but it is very simplistic. Whit Sunday or White Sunday; those who were being baptized would all wear their white gowns to get baptized.

And of course they were not with us yesterday. Yesterday was the Sabbath. "We don't have to keep that old law because we have been saved by grace. And all those works are just bad, bad, bad. That's legalism. Legalism is terrible." They do not understand legalism either. So if they really believe the Bible, they would follow it.

Now, the Feast of Pentecost is a harvest festival. This harvest festival pictures the spiritual harvest and acceptance of God's firstfruits, which we believe are those that comprise the Bride of Christ, the 144,000. These are the faithful in both testaments, Old and New, from the very beginning, all of those who have been faithfully following the Word of God. How much they knew at the time was enough for God to understand them as faithful.

And so we go into Hebrews 11 and we find the heroes of faith all the way back to righteous Abel. How much Abel knew we do not know, but God deemed him faithful. So we have Abel and Noah; and we get to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and let us not forget Sarah; and Moses and Joshua and all those He has found worthy of the Kingdom. And of course, that comes up then through John the Baptist and the disciples who became apostles and all those first century Christians, those who were truly faithful; and down through the ages to us. All of those who are faithful to Jesus Christ in both Old and New Testaments, those whose lives were modeled after what they knew about God and what in terms of the New Testament, what they understood about their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So I have an easy-to-remember catchphrase that is going to take us through this whole sermon. And that is: Firstfruits faithfully follow Christ. Three f's. Firstfruits faithfully follow Christ. I have called this sermon "Faithful Following Firstfruits." All those fs. If you can find it on the Internet, there is "The Prodigal Son in F" and it is very good. Just about every word in the Prodigal Son has been made into a word that starts with an "f." It is paraphrased and it is very good. I would recommend you finding it somewhere.

Let us go back to Leviticus 23 and get a running start into the holy day and the theme of what I am trying to talk about today, about this faithful following of Christ.

Leviticus 23:9-11 And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.'

What this is is obviously what happened back during the Days of Unleavened Bread when the sheaf of the wave offering of barley was waved before God. And we understood that this is talking about the resurrection and

the ascension of Jesus Christ to be accepted by the Father. That began the count, right? That is when we start the 50 days, the seven weeks, and then this day to the Feast of Pentecost.

Leviticus 23:15-17 'And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf for the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the Lord.'

So we count the 50 days and we get down to this day. There is a new grain offering that must be given to the Lord. And then verse 17 tells us in what form it takes. It is made of two wave loaves that are baked with leaven and they represent very clearly the firstfruits to the Lord.

Leviticus 23:20-22 'The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. [There was also a meat offering there.] They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you [which we are doing now]. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleanings from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.'

So we have this offering being made in tandem with an offering of two lambs.

Now, these two loaves represent two parts of the firstfruits and we have traditionally thought of them as the Old Testament saints and the New Testament saints. Those who were found faithful under the Old Covenant and those who are faithful under the New and so these are waved, lifted before God. It is like a presentation, that you are showing God what is there

and you are asking Him to make a choice on it, you are asking Him to judge. There is a judgment in this process.

And so these wave loaves, which are made of this fine flour, have leaven in it, and they have been baked. They are not grain anymore in terms of either the whole kernel or any kind of flour. They have been made into bread. They have gone through a process of production, you could even say of perfection, they have been made into something that is useful. Normally, we do not go around eating wheat berries just as is. We tend to want to grind them into flour and make them into something that is more palatable, more useful to us. And so we process them into bread, cookies, waffles, English muffins, you name it. We make them into things that we would like to eat and we often make them with leaven. Most often we make them with leaven because it makes it even more palatable to us. There is a reason why matzos are called the bread of affliction. We do not necessarily like eating them all the time. We would rather eat something that has been processed and made into something that is better than the original, as we would look at it.

So these wave loaves are lifted up before God and the priest, in effect, is asking God, "Are these good enough for You? Can they be put on Your table?" And the answer is "Yes." And so they are accepted before the Father, or at this time it would have been Christ acting as Yahweh, saying, "Ok, these are acceptable before Me. They are Mine. They can be part of My table, part of the meal, part of the participation together in this meal."

We have there a typical description of what happens with Christians, what happens with firstfruits. Maybe it is better to put it that way. What goes on in the life of a firstfruit of God. This entire period, from the time that started with the offering of the firstfruits all the way through the Day of Pentecost when the two wave loaves are waived for acceptance before God, all revolve around these firstfruits. It starts with the very first fruit, Jesus Christ, and it ends with the firstfruits of these two covenants seen in the wave loaves. The whole harvest period revolves around these firstfruits. And as a harvest period, we understand a spiritual harvest, where people are taken from seedling, or seed, to growing up producing fruit, until the time that they are reaped in a resurrection.

We can see this in a typical way all the way through this period of time. And of course, I have given sermons on Pentecost before about the actual time this takes. It is 50 days, day for a year principle. It is like the 50-year converted life of a person. If a person is called at, let us say age 20, it takes him 50 years to get to age 70. That is a normal lifespan. And so we have the whole lifespan of a person played out during this Pentecost season through the count. We go from their earliest conversion, their earliest calling, all the way to the time of their death and then on to the resurrection where they are accepted before God.

Of course, we see that this wave offering, these wave loaves had leaven in it. This grain was combined with leaven. Leaven is corruption. Leaven a symbol of a corruption. Leaven puffs up. Leaven is a symbol of the sin that we have to get out of our lives. But fortunately, it is not "living leaven" that is still puffing up. This is dead leaven that has been taken through the heat, the fire of an oven, which symbolizes our trials, and that leaven has been killed and the finished product, even though it was made with leaven, is acceptable before God because He by His grace has forgiven that corruption, forgiven those sins. But He has used that corruption in the person and in the world in order to prepare us for use.

God, being a very efficient God, allows us to live in sin—our own and others—so we can learn the lessons to overcome those sins, to get rid of them, and to live lives of goodness and love and forbearance and all those good things that Christ modeled for us, and eventually overcome all of that and be accepted before God as complete.

So, the loaves represent these firstfruits. And we find supporting symbolism for this all through the Bible. Just for an example, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares shows God putting wheat in His field, sowing them there, and it grows by His providence, and then He harvests it in the first resurrection. Of course, I am not talking about all the tares that the enemy sows, but that is the leaven that is put there, the sin that these people have to grow up with and mature in the environment of, so that they can ultimately be prepared for when God does harvest it in the first resurrection. And as we saw in my sermon on Pentecost last year, the wheat is processed and prepared for use. All these things illustrate just another view of the firstfruits.

If you feel like you have been beaten and trodden down and ground and sifted and leavened, and then put through the fire—good. That means God is working with you and preparing you as one of His firstfruits for acceptance and resurrection into His Kingdom. Those are all those experiences, temptations, trials, tests, sufferings, and persecutions that we go through, but they are *given* to you. You are allowed to go through them to produce a finished, complete product, God's product. And we can decry them all we want, we can moan and weep all we want, but God says they are good for us because they are producing the image of Jesus Christ in us and that is what He wants to see.

So from this, we see a great deal more in Christian life than nominal Christians do. Think of all that I just said over the last five or ten minutes about that process that God is putting us through. And I only mentioned our calling, I think once, maybe twice. But think about what a nominal Christian would say about what the Christian life is all about. They would perhaps answer an altar call. They were sitting in church one day and there was a fiery preacher up there and he called for those who give their hearts to the Lord. And so they came forward and that is what they did. They answered the altar call, they gave their hearts to the Lord. Most of them believe in some sort of baptism, whether it is by sprinkling or by immersion. So they do that.

And then they profess to anyone who wants to hear them that they have been irrevocably saved by grace through the blood of Christ. They have been covered by the blood of Christ, they are saved. And the very next thing that they think in terms of theology (I am exaggerating a bit here), but they think the next thing is they are going to go to heaven when they die. What is in between the time that they are saved by grace, no one can snatch them out of God's hands, and they go to heaven? And you know that in Britain and in the United States where we see this most, hardly any of them even go to church. What was the statistic? Six or seven percent go to church in Britain. And was it still in the thirties somewhere here in America? But that is way down from what it used to be in both countries.

They go to church on Sunday, maybe, perhaps every week, but perhaps not, especially if something exciting is going on—and never between September

and February because that is when the NFL season is and you have to stay home to be able to watch the game. But anyway, they keep Christmas and Easter and they maybe pray, they maybe read the Bible every once in a while. But to them that is just window dressing. They can do it whether they want to or not because they have already been saved by grace and they are assured of heaven. So what reason is there to do any of this other stuff?

Under their interpretation of Christianity, actual *living by faith* is not required. All they had to do was profess their allegiance to Christ, say the name(!), and that is it. They think they have been saved. They do not need to do any more. God is just this big, soft, huggable, loving bear of a God and He just wants to call everybody into His warm embrace. And so He does not require anything of anybody. Just say the word, just say the word, say the name, and you will be saved and you will come and be with Me in heaven and depending on what you are, I do not know. What do you do? You dodge past Saint Peter at the gate and then you are free to do whatever you want.

But that is not how it is for true Christians. We believe in God's Word and we know God wants us to live according to His instruction. Why in the world reveal all this stuff, have men write it down, and have it transmitted through hundreds and thousands of years in time in order to just sit and collect dust on the shelf? Because it is not necessary, is it? All you got to do is believe in the name and you are going to be saved.

Now, I will admit I am exaggerating quite a bit. There are people out there who believe that you need to put on the image of Christ. You need to follow Him, but it is not necessary. They have already been saved. They do not need to do anything more. They do not need to prove anything. They do not need to show anything. They do not need to be waved before God for acceptance. They do not need to be prepared. He is just going to usher them right in and put them in the front row.

That is kind of how it is out there. But we know that God wants us to live according to His instructions. He wants us to live a life of obedience to His commandments. And that takes faith, a living faith. That means trusting Him, trusting His Word as true and as useful and good for us. And it means

doing that when the world is out there telling us to do the exact opposite. We have to live according to His Word in a world contrary to Him, contrary to us, and we have to maintain our faith to that Word and to Him.

In a world of idolaters, we have to fear and worship the one true God. In a world of liars and deception, we have to speak the truth. In a world of thieves, we have to give. In a world of hatred and murder, we have to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us and persecute us. In a world of divorce, we have to strengthen our marriages. In a world of non-stop work and play, we have to keep the Sabbath. In a world of angst and stress, we have to live in hope and joy.

All of this takes faith. We have to trust God that this is the way that is going to complete us and perfect us.

Please turn to Hebrews 3 and 4. We are going to go to a few scriptures here. Hebrews 3 and 4 is perhaps the section of Scripture where the doctrine of faith and obedience is most clearly expounded. Essentially the argument that Paul (and I believe it was Paul who was behind this book), gives here over these two chapters is that the faithful person, the believer, the Christian, is one who obeys. And on the flip side, he looks at it in the negative, he says the unfaithful, the unbeliever, is disobedient. He is a rebel against God. He takes part in the rebellion.

Now, God gives the former, meaning those who are faithful, the promise of His eternal rest, which He says has not occurred yet. And the latter, those who are unfaithful and unbelieving, those who are rebels, He says He will destroy. He makes it very clear, black and white: you are faithful, you are obedient; you are unfaithful, you are a rebel. If you are faithful, you get to enter His rest. If you are unfaithful, you will be destroyed. Very simple.

Let us read a few of these verses. Let us start with verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3. He starts it out pointing out the proper example.

Hebrews 3:1-2 Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house.

So he gives us two terrific examples here. But he says that Christ is greater than Moses because Christ is the Son. Moses was simply a servant in the house. Moses did a great job as a servant, but Christ, who is our Apostle and our High Priest, He proved Himself faithful as the Son. He is the heir. He is the one that we need to follow.

Hebrews 3:12-19 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence [faith] steadfast to the end, while it is said, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey. So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

They did not have faith, they did not obey.

Hebrews 4:1-3 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear [meaning fear God, fear His wrath, fear the consequences] lest any of you seem to come short of it. For indeed, the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest.

Hebrews 4:6 Since therefore it remains that some must enter it [that is, His rest] and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, . . .

Hebrews 4:11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

I think that lays it out pretty clearly here.

We have Christ as our example of being faithful; and then we have the man Moses who is also faithful. We can look at both examples. They are wonderful examples. But Moses led the people into the wilderness to bring them into the Promised Land, a type of our journey to the Kingdom of God. And these people heard the gospel, as we see in chapter 4, verses 1 and 2 there. They heard the gospel, but they did not mix it with faith. They did not believe the gospel that was preached to them. They did not believe the truth of what God was doing with them.

And so what did they do? They rebelled, they disobeyed. And God said, "Ok, if this is the way you're going to be, you're all going to die in the wilderness." So He destroyed them and they did not enter His rest. Paul tells us, let us take a look at this example and learn something from it. And the thing we need to learn from it is that we have heard the gospel, we have to mix it with faith, that is, we have to take what we have heard, be faithful, and *obey God*. Do the things that He wants us to do, in fear that we will not make it, so that we will make it. And be diligent about it! Have some zeal!

That is what He wants us to do. Take what we have learned, and what we continue to learn, mix it with faith, that is, trust and confidence in God that He can get you where He needs you to be and where you want to be, which is the Kingdom of God. Trust Him that the instructions that He gives you in the Bible are apt for your situation. What you need to do, how you need to be, what your attitude needs to be, and do it, obey it, follow it.

And you know what that is going to do? That is going to land you in His rest. The Promised Land is yours. God will not destroy you in the wilderness. The Kingdom is open to you. Hear the gospel, add some faith, follow the instructions, enter His rest. Sounds easy, does it not? We know it is not. But that is the formula. Hear, faith, follow, firstfruits. Simple to say; hard to do. But that is the general formula.

Let us go to just a few pages over to the book of James chapter 2. We are going to read quite a long section here from verse 14 all the way down through the end of the chapter. You will see that James basically says the same thing. But he is talking about that faith that merely professes or asents

to something is dead. It does not mean anything. You can say that you have all the faith you want, but if you do not mix it with works, it is dead, it does nothing, it is lifeless, it just sits there or lies there, it does nothing. It gets you nowhere. And so he gives us some examples.

James 2:14-21 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things that are needful for the body, what does it profit? [So if you say you are going to do something, you say you want to help somebody but you never follow through, what have you done? You have just basically declared yourself a hypocrite.]

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." [James says] Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. [And we will compare the two and see which one is actually better, which one gets anything done.] You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! [because they understand the power of the One that they believe exists] But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father [now this is the example] justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

See, he told God he would do what he said. But then he did it! He expected God to work on his behalf, sure. But he went to the very point where he was about to slash his son's throat, and his works, what he did, what he showed God, proved to God that he was going to be faithful. It was not just an ascent. It was, "Yes, God, I'm already doing it."

James 2:22-24 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? [It completed it. It was not just words, it was words in action that actually completed, perfected, finished the whole process.] And the Scripture was

fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Maybe here the word justified should be better translated as "shown to be right; shown to be righteous; shown to be in line or aligned with God." So let us put that in there. "You see then that a man is shown to be in line with God by works and not by faith only." You can say, "Hey, me and God, we're best buds" all you want. But when you show that you are living the way that God commands, then you have shown yourself to be in line with Him. That is evidence that you can take to the bank. It is not just a profession.

James 2:25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

She promised that she would help. But it was not until she actually did what she said she was going to do that it showed that she actually did have faith even though she was a Gentile harlot in this city that had just heard about the might of Israel and the might of Israel's God. So he concludes here:

James 2:26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

They must be together.

And so we have what we have come to understand in the church of God is that God desires a living faith, one that believes and responds in gratitude to God's grace with an outpouring of good works. And the good works include obedience to God's instructions as well as doing all those wonderful things for other people that can be done. So faith alone or profession of faith alone is incomplete and immature, spiritually, and therefore it must be combined with works and obedience. The reason it must be combined is so that it can fulfill its potential, so we can fulfill *our* potential. And the potential that we have is to be turned, transformed into the image of Christ. Just professing faith, professing belief does not transform us into the image of Christ. We have to *do* things to write the character of God on our hearts through God's Holy Spirit.

We have to practice what we learn. And we are not going to get good at it until we practice it and practice it and practice it, till it becomes an automatic reaction, so that our first thought when something comes up is to live out the righteousness of Jesus Christ. I mean, think about it. Remember my sermon a while back, in December, on meekness? How many people are naturally meek? Now, some people are naturally imperturbable, some people are naturally weak. But how many people are actually meek in the way that Jesus Christ and Moses were meek? We can *believe* that we are meek. "Oh, I'm meek. I'm just right under Jesus Christ and Moses. I have the perfect reactions at all time." And then something bad happens and we fly to pieces.

Whereas the meekness that I taught in that sermon, remember, is that of a river that is going down toward the sea and no rock, no branch, no ship, no nothing disturbs him from his course. He is able to just swallow it, go around it, go over it, whatever. Just move placidly on. Can you do that just by saying you think you are that? No. Most of us tear our hair out in stress when anything even remotely bad happens to us. So we are not really meek.

I mean, think about Moses. "Oh, yeah, I'm good. Just send those 2.5 million people over. We won't have a problem. Forty years in the wilderness will just kind of flow right through. All that sand, no water, no food. We'll be fine." He learned meekness by 40 years of dealing with those stupid Israelites—rebellious, unfaithful, lying, cheating, murdering, idolatrous Israelites. So by the time we get to the end of his life, God could write, "Hey, Moses was the meekest man on the earth." Yeah! But he had to pay the price to learn that meekness.

And it is the same way with anything, any part of the character of Jesus Christ that we are supposed to be transformed into. We have to learn it over time by exercising faith in *doing* things, in making decisions, in facing problems, in overcoming sin. That is how the character is inscribed upon our hearts. It becomes part of us because we did it, and we did it again and did it again, and every time that we did it we probably failed to do it properly. And so we do it again. And God keeps sending things in little waves toward us until we overcome it and inscribe it on our character through His Spirit—with Him, of course.

But He is working with us. As that bread is being processed into a loaf that is acceptable, He is working with us all the time. He is either crushing us, grinding us, kneading us, forming us, shaping us, putting us through the fire, but it is going to produce a beautiful loaf at the end, one that will be acceptable to Him.

The Psalms contain a number of passages along this line where the psalmist often declares his trust in God. But then he follows it up pretty much immediately with promises or examples of his upright behavior. He knows that it is not just enough to say God, I trust you. A profession of the mouth of your faith is not enough. You have got to show with your actions that you are indeed faithful. So let us go to just a couple of these. I have got a lot but since we do not have much time, I will not read them all. But let us go back to Book One. Back to Psalm 25 and we will see this one. This is not a Psalm, Part One sermon, by the way. But it fits because there is a lot of these in Psalm, Book One. Faith and trust in God, of course, is one of the themes.

Psalm 25:16-22 Turn Yourself to me, and have mercy on me, for I am desolate and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have enlarged; bring me out of my distresses! Look on my affliction and my pain, and forgive all my sins. Consider my enemies, for they are many; and they hate me with cruel hatred. Keep my soul, and deliver me; let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You. [now listen] Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for You. Redeem Israel, O God, out of all their troubles!

He says, "Look, I've just been encompassed by enemies. It's a horrible situation. I can't get out of it without Your help. I trust in You to get me out. But integrity and uprightness will preserve me."

Let us go on to another one. The very next chapter, chapter 26.

Psalm 26:1-3 Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity. I have also trusted in the Lord; I shall not slip. Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my mind and my heart. For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Your truth.

And then he goes on and talks about how he has done that. Let us go to another one.

Psalm 119:41-48 Let Your mercies come also to me, Oh Lord—Your salvation according to Your word. So shall I have an answer for him who reproaches me, for I trust in Your word. And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for I have hoped in Your ordinances. So I shall keep Your law continually, forever and ever. And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts. I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed. And I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love. My hands also I will lift up to Your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on Your statutes.

So he was full of the Word of God in him—God's commandments, God's statutes, God's precepts—and he would exercise them all in his life and he would speak of them to others, even before kings, he said. So we see how this all is. If you want to go to Proverbs 3:5-7, you will see a similar thing, trust in the Lord, and then he talks about actually doing what God says after that.

We believe that Jesus is the Christ and that His blood has covered our sins. And as Peter instructs in Acts 2:38, we repent and are baptized. That is what he told the crowd there that had gathered on Pentecost. We want to do what is right and we want to be worthy of the calling that God has given us. So what do we do? What do we do at that point? This is the question that millions of Christians need to ask themselves.

Well, let us go to Matthew 4, verses 18 through 20. This is Jesus' answer.

Matthew 4:18-20 And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." And they immediately left their nets and followed Him.

Then he did the same with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. And later on, we would find that he did it with Matthew and he did it in John 1 with Philip. He had told them all, "Follow Me." So that is the simplest way to express what we do during our Christian lives. That faith combined with the obedience can be thought of as following Christ. Follow Christ.

Let us go on to Matthew 16.

Matthew 16:24 Jesus then said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me [that is, to do what He does], let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works."

What we are warned here, after the fact that we understand that following Him is what we have to do, we are warned that following is not easy. It is the way of bearing our cross. It is an indication that we have to live a life of sacrifice. We have to be, as Paul said in Romans 12:1, a living sacrifice. And we bear that emblem of our death all the time; that we know that Christ died for us, and we must therefore die throughout our lives, as it were, in service to Him.

We must bear our human nature throughout this life and war against it all the time and know that, even though we try and try and try to do what is good and right and to please Him, we are never going to measure up to the perfection of Christ. But we follow Him anyway. And we can do this joyfully knowing that we have the opportunity to imitate Him in some small, even imperfect way. Paul, throughout his epistles, was joyful. Almost, sometimes, it seems almost ludicrously joyful for bearing the marks of Jesus Christ or bearing His sufferings, something we do not think about doing. But he understood this concept that he needed to in a way personify Christ in everything. And so he was willing to do anything to live up to that standard, even if it meant persecution and even death.

Let us go to Acts 11, verse 26. I just want to touch on this. And the last line in the verse says, "and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Why were they not called Christians before this? It is hard to say what the church was called. Most thought it was a sect of the Jews. There were several references in Acts to calling it "the Way," yet here in Antioch, for the first time, probably sometime in the early 40s AD, they were being called Christians.

You know what that means? It means they were "of Christ," they were those who follow Christ, they were the ones who called Him Lord and Savior. And so they became Christians. And it is how these people, we included, have been known ever since. We have His name as our name. We are identified with Him and we are supposed to carry His name before the world and represent Him before everyone we come into contact with. Jesus says in John 13:35 that that is how they should know us, "By this all will know that You are My disciples, if you have love for one another," because they are emulating Christ and He loved us.

In I Peter 2, verse 21 we are told that that is how we are to live, just like Christ lived.

I Peter 2:21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.

Now, this specifically is talking about suffering for righteousness' sake, but it applies in principle to every part of our walk with God. That He left us an example of righteous living, living as God would live if He were a human. And that is what Jesus Christ was. He was a human and He perfectly displayed throughout His 33 years of life how God lives on earth and how we should then live like Him. Paul said in I Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ."

So, like I mentioned before, we could look at a righteous man and if we see Christ in Him, we can follow that example just as we could follow the example of Moses, who was not Christ at all. He was a man just like us, but he was a faithful servant in the house. I John 2 also mentions this concept.

I John 2:3-6 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments [hey, obedience] He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments [I wonder if Protestants out there have read this?], is a liar and the truth is not in Him. [Oh, that is harsh!] But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him [or completed]. By this we know that we are in Him. [It is how we know that we have His image, that we are part of His Body, that we are like Him.] He who says he abides in Him [who is part of the Body of Christ] ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

That is one of the stipulations of membership, folks. That if you are part of the Body of Christ, you are to conform to the Body of Christ. And I am not talking about other church members. I am talking about the Head, Jesus Christ. So if you have been given membership to this Body, then it is your *obligation* to walk as He walked, *just as He walked*. Notice that. It means *the same as, in the same way as*. That is pretty rough, hard to do, but that is the standard. It is super high.

One small point here, the word is "ought." Do you think about the word ought very often? What that means is, we are under obligation! We owe so much to God and Christ for Their grace and love to such an extent that we are indebted to the point that we *must* walk as He walked. We can never pay Them back for what They have done for us. So we are *obliged* to live according to Their standards.

Paul says that we were once slaves to this world. Christ redeemed us, He bought us, we are His slaves, we are *supposed* to do what He says. And He says, "Live as I lived." So we are obliged to live the life of Christ in the world.

Notice James 1, verse 18 as we wind this down. In verse 17, he talked about every good and perfect gift coming down from the Father of lights.

James 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

James had just mentioned God's good and perfect gifts and it seems like he skips into another subject in verse 18, but that is not the case. It is actually his next thought: God gives good and perfect gifts. They come down from the Father of lights who does not change. And then his first thing he thinks of is that God's greatest gift that He has given to us is that, in His good pleasure God called us, chose us, regenerated us to be His children. That He sent His word of truth out there to grasp us, to pluck us out of this world, to give us belief and faith so that we would be His firstfruits.

He has revealed His truth to us and given us every means—these are also part of His good and perfect gifts—to understand it and to be transformed by it through His Spirit, the giving of which we commemorate today. That is the greatest and most perfect gift of all. That God plucked us out of the world so that we could be His sons and daughters, and not just sons and daughters, but *firstfruits, firstborn!* Do you understand that? The word here, firstfruits, is *aparche*. It refers to *first in honor*, as well as first in order. The biblical writers used it of persons superior and excellent to others of the same class. We are not there yet, but that is the goal. He has called us to be the *best ever* for all eternity. Do you understand what firstfruits means?

Paul, in I Corinthians 15:23 calls Christ the firstfruits, which He is. But do you understand He is the *first* of the firstfruits and has, of course, the greatest honor of all. All knees will bow to Him! But we are of His *kind*. He says that, "we are a kind of firstfruits." It is special. We are being made to be like Him. And John says in I John 3:2, we *will* be like Him because we are going to see Him in all His glory and all His wonderful character—as He is.

The great gift that God has bestowed on us is that we have the opportunity to be among the first of God's spiritual children and share the honor of *primogeniture* with Christ. Do you understand what that means? We receive the double portions as firstborn. That is a stupendous gift! And God did it out of the pleasure of His good will, by grace. This is almost beyond comprehension.

Let us conclude in Revelation 14, verses 1 through 5 and let this sink in. This is you and me.

Revelation 14:1-5 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one can learn that song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

John's vision of those firstfruits in His Kingdom is incredible. To think that we have the opportunity to be among them. We have the awesome potential of fulfilling this verse in ourselves as redeemed humans made like the Son of Man. These were the ones who proved faithful unto death. These were the ones who follow Jesus Christ, no matter what. These are the ones who will attain their reward as firstfruits of God and Christ.

Remember the catchphrase, the formula? Faithful following firstfruits. That is it. Be faithful. Follow Christ. And one day you will be among these firstfruits.