

The Weightier Matters (Part 4) : Faith And Fidelity

by Staff

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Our Savior Jesus Christ shows in Matthew 23 that the scribes and Pharisees had perverted judgment and were terribly unmerciful to anyone "beneath them," as viewed from their own exalted position. This self-exaltation reached the point where they placed themselves above God. Matthew 23:18-19 explains that they honored their gift on the altar as more important than the altar itself. God's altar sanctifies or sets apart other things as holy. A person's "goodness" placed on the altar for all to admire is worth nothing!

This form of idolatry destroys faith in God. The Pharisees reckoned their salvation automatic because they paid such attention to minute details of the law—even adding more restrictive rules to it. Their over-carefulness bred an attitude of *deserving* salvation. They saw no need for a savior, for was not their obedience a guarantee? Surely God could not deny salvation to any so righteous as they!

Contrast the publican who "would not so much as raise his eyes" to God (Luke 18:9-14). He *knew* he was a sinner and needed help. Though he was not clothed in righteousness and thus not an immediate candidate for salvation, Christ could see in him a recognition of sin. His shame and humility would make it far easier for him to learn and repent than the pompous, self-satisfied scribes and Pharisees.

Christ instructs us to pray in private and do our good deeds quietly (Matthew 6:1-8). We should not even let one hand know what the other is doing. This does not mean we blindly walk in circles, unaware of what we are doing. It cautions us not to pat ourselves on the back in admiration of our righteousness.

The Pharisees also felt that their position as Israelites under the covenant would influence God. Likewise, some will approach Christ, saying, "Why reject me? I've been good! I've been in the church for decades!" Luke 13:24-28 shows that being where Christ was, eating and drinking in His presence, was not enough for salvation. He calls such people "workers of iniquity"! Being "in the church" is not enough.

Fidelity

The Greek word for "faith" can also be translated "fidelity," as it is in Titus 2:10. To understand what the scribes and Pharisees lacked, we need to examine fidelity along with the traditional definition of faith.

Fidelity, as defined by Webster, is "the quality of being faithful, accuracy in details, exactness." The dictionary adds an interesting modern analogy to explain fidelity: "the degree to which an electronic device (as a record player, radio or television) accurately reproduces its effect (as sound or picture)."

We know we are to bring "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (II Corinthians 10:5) and to "let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). John tells us "to walk just as He walked" (I John 2:6). Peter advises, "Christ . . . [left] us an example, that you should follow His steps" (I Peter 2:21).

Spiritually, fidelity is to reproduce faithfully and exactly the thoughts, attitudes, steps and paths of Jesus Christ. The "sounds" our lives make on earth reach heaven either as the scratchy, tinny, garbled clanging of carnality, or as harmonic, melodious, pleasant reproductions of Christ in us, the hope of glory.

This is where the Pharisees missed the whole point of the law. They were not like God at all! They were so busy with their little "additions to make it better," they forgot how to treat each other. This is a great danger facing the church today. We can focus so intently on a specific point of doctrine—the calendar, divorce and remarriage or church government—that we forget that God bases our judgment on how we treat others (Matthew 25:34-46). Christ went about doing good (Acts 10:38). He showed compassion, healed, helped and set a righteous example in all His activities. He never once gossiped, slandered or verbally abused anyone. While correct teaching is of extreme importance (II John 10), *living it* is of even greater importance because doers will be justified, not hearers only (Romans 2:13; James 1:22-25).

The "sounds" the scribes and Pharisees produced were low fidelity, unrecognizable to God in the intent of His law. When God hears our voices, does it sound to Him just like Christ did? Because we are still alive, we are better off than the Pharisees. We still have opportunity to learn to think and act like Christ, to work on reacting to wrongs and persecution—deserved or undeserved—just as He would. We have time to grow in saying just the right thing at the right time to help, encourage, inspire or guide others.

James 3:9 says we bless God and curse men made in His likeness; we respect God but not His creation. James shows this is a contradiction and wrong. Disrespecting God's creation is disrespecting Him. He expects high fidelity from us in what we say—"pure, . . . peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (verse 17). He will not listen to what is "earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (verses 15-16).

Upon hearing the dissonance, the discord, the accusations, the gossip, the fault-finding in the church today, is it any wonder God covered His ears and blew us apart (Lamentations 2:1-8)? We *can* "get comfortable" again in our chosen "daughter" of our mother, criticizing others who might think differently. Or, we can really go to work on ourselves, realizing that we are not yet Christlike, and improve our fidelity. God's ears would appreciate it. When we completely control our tongues, we will have perfect fidelity (James 3:2).

Fidelity, then, is the kind of faith mentioned in James 2:14-26. Just "believing" or blindly trusting that we are qualified to enter God's Kingdom is not sufficient. Christ must see Himself in us. Faith without works is dead, so we show real faith by our actions (verses 17-18). Even the demons "believe" God exists—and they tremble in fear (verse 19), but they are unwilling to think like Him, talk like Him, live like Him. Theirs is a dead faith. We are to show our faith by our works, by walking exactly as He walked, by our "fidelity."

Faith

This understanding does not exclude the more traditional definition of faith as Paul explains in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Christ "calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17)!

Often, once we see the standard of righteousness and holiness that God requires of us, we become discouraged, recognizing our sins and weaknesses. We feel so unworthy, so sinful, that we feel unable to leave the past behind and make the effort required to grow in holy character.

Faith—belief in what we cannot yet see but act upon it, knowing it will truly happen—becomes a very weighty matter! In Hebrews 10:35-36, Paul encourages us to have confidence, believing that if we do God's will, He will reward us. Verse 38 instructs us to live by faith, not drawing back, for if we doubt or disbelieve, God will not be pleased with us. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul gives example after example of faithful people like Abraham, who boldly stepped forward to seek a place, "not knowing where he was going" (verse 8). Some had to leave father and mother, were fed to lions, tortured, not accepting deliverance. Some wandered in sheep and goatskins, destitute. He recites story after story of such people. These, who believed enough to serve God regardless of cost, will be in the Kingdom of God, and if we show like faith, God will include us with them (verse 40).

After rehearsing historical accounts of people who, just like us, really believed and trusted God, Paul gives a "stir to action" speech. He implores us to obey regardless of any shame that some might heap on us, and he chides us for not resisting enough against sin (Hebrews 12:1-4). When God chastens us for failing to reach the mark—and God punishes all whom He loves, just as He is punishing the church today—we should not sink into despair and self-pity. Instead, Paul urges, "Make straight paths for your feet. . . . Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (verses 13-14).

Can we really turn loose of our fears and trust God with our lives? Do we really believe He has our best interests in mind, or do we panic when it *appears* something bad will happen? Do our actions say, "We'll trust and worship you, God, as long as the cost is not too great"? We counted the cost when we were baptized. We put our hand to the plow and cannot turn back. As bond slaves of Christ, we surrendered everything in our lives—including our lives—to Him. We are not our own (I Corinthians 6:19). If we seek to save our lives now, we will lose them forever (Matthew 16:25; John 12:25).

Often our pride arises, and we "won't take it" from man. Sometimes we "won't take it" from God. Our faith can seem strong as long as things are going well, but if God has something different in mind that appears negative to us, our faith, our trust, our fidelity, suddenly evaporates. We tend to try to solve such problems our own way, then assume God's hand was in the solution. We do not want to sever our relationship with Him—just make sure we get our way. After all, we rationalize, who knows what we need more than us? Can God not see that we were going to lose our wealth, our health, our life? Our belief, our faith, must be stronger than our fear.

We cannot please God without faith. Today, this generation is spoiled. We want to live our way—any way we choose—and still be blessed and accepted by God and man. This generation expects something for nothing. Our "welfare mentality" is not limited to expecting the government to send us a check simply because we exist. We expect "our rights"—the right to say or do anything, to have no responsibility for our actions and yet to indulge in the good things of life. This is not a trust or faith based on valid expectancy. God will shortly take away these "rights" in great tribulation and require fidelity before giving blessings.

Our confidence in spiritual salvation is also compromised when we come to expect salvation without high fidelity standards—sounding and acting like Christ. Through sin, our confidence and trust in God are eroded. We doubt. We waver. Such a man is "unstable in all his ways," says James. "Let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7).

Increasing Faith

Faith is increased by hearing the Word of God, for we gain confidence by hearing of the faithfulness of God:

- » God is *faithful* , by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (I Corinthians 1:9)
- » He who calls you is *faithful* , who also will do it. (I Thessalonians 5:24)
- » Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and *faithful* High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)
- » If we confess our sins, He is *faithful* and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:9)
- » Indeed the devil is about to throw some of you in prison. . . . Be *faithful* until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10)

We should feel better already!

Now we need to believe this unwaveringly, boldly, completely. It did not come easily for the scribes and Pharisees, nor did they even really consider it. Is it any easier at the end of the age?

Then He spoke a parable to them, that *men always ought to pray and not lose heart* , saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Avenge me of my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"
(Luke 18:1-8)

The real problem with the scribes and Pharisees is that they were totally selfish. They weighted their judgment toward themselves, and so they had no room for mercy for others. Nothing about them resembled Christ—no fidelity. They did not see a need for faith in the forgiveness in Christ, for they felt they needed none.

Christ gave them the answer to their problem. If they would render proper judgment, without partiality, emphasis on self would diminish. Their mercy would allow people to make mistakes and have space to repent rather than fear being destroyed financially or otherwise. Finally, with true fidelity, they would treat everyone as Christ did. Their faith would increase, as would the faith of those under their influence.

Had they properly applied these three qualities—judgment, mercy and faith—their attitudes would have turned from selfish carnal goals to outgoing concern for others. They would have begun displaying the real love of God. If we apply them, we will have the confidence and boldness of which Paul spoke—the kind of faith required for salvation. The scribes and Pharisees lacked it. Being alive, we still have the chance to obtain it.

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