

Faith is one of those words that we use a lot, but unfortunately we use it to mean so many different things that sometimes it's difficult to know what exactly we're talking about. It doesn't help that it seems like every Christian group out there defines faith a little bit differently, defines it as something that we do, or something that we create and God sustains, or whatever the case might be. So that doesn't help anything. But it also doesn't help that the Bible doesn't use the word faith in the same way in every place. Sometimes it talks about the faith, the way that we do when we say we confess the faith or confess our faith in the words of the creed. In other words, describing what it is that we believe, that we believe in God, that we believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that we believe in Jesus Christ our Savior, and so on. But that's not what we're talking about today, not faith in that sense. The Bible also uses faith to talk about God's faith, that God has faith toward us, because he is faithful, that he keeps his promises, that he will not go back on his word. But we're not talking about that kind of faith today either. What we're talking about is the way that we use the word faith the most often. I have faith. I believe in Jesus Christ. That act of believing, that act of having faith, is what we are talking about today. And it's important to bring that up, because we're not doing this just for the sake of getting things right. Why we're doing this is so that we know what's truly important, because if we don't have faith, we will not get into heaven. And when we have faith, when we believe in God, then we will be with him forever. So we're not talking about faith just for the sake of getting it right. This is literally a matter of life and death. So when we talk about having faith, what do we mean? And what does it mean in the Bible to have saving faith, to have a real, living faith as opposed to a fake one? And further, what does it mean to have a strong faith as opposed to a weak one? When we answer all of those questions together, which we can do from our gospel lesson for today, we will have a good idea of what faith is and what it means for us.

Because the way I look at it, Christians, faith has three parts. You need to know who God is. You need to trust in God. And you need to know that that all applies to you personally. So that knowledge, that trust, and that application, the three of them together make a true living faith. And we can see that right here in our text. Take the leper, for example, in verse two. He says, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And you'll notice how all three pieces are right there. "Lord," I know who you are. You are God. "If you will," I trust that you can do this. If you want to, you're able to do this. "You can make me clean." That knowledge, that trust, and that application, all three together make a living faith in this leper.

So why is it so important to have all three of these together? Why do we have to have these three pieces together as if we're putting a puzzle together? Because if we don't have one of these pieces, we don't have faith. It's that simple. Take knowledge, for example. If I don't know who God is, there's no way that I can believe in him. It's just like Paul says in Romans, "How can they call on him of whom they have never heard?" There's no such thing as being an anonymous Christian. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." So we need to know who this God is first before we are able to believe in him. So no knowledge, no faith.

What about the second one? About that trust which we have in God? If that's not there either, then we aren't going to have faith. Because I could know who God is, I could know everything that he has done, but if I don't actually trust him, if I don't think he can do anything, then how do I have faith? Think of it in terms of the Pharisees. They knew who God was, probably better than we ever will. But they trusted in themselves and treated others with contempt. Because they trusted in themselves, they don't have faith. They put their trust in the wrong thing, and for that reason, lacking trust in God that he can do what he wants means that we will not have faith.

But what about that last one, talking about applying all this to me? Well, that's just as important too,

because if I know who God is and I know what he's capable of doing, but I don't think that he can do anything for me personally, how is that faith? It's not. Because if I don't think that God is going to do anything for me personally on an individual level, I could just believe that God is capable of all things, but it's not going to create that living faith which holds onto him. So I have to have all three of them together: the knowledge, the trust, and that application to me personally, and then I will have a living faith.

You see that also with the centurion today, how he calls him Lord, because he knows who he is. And he says, "You can do this, Lord, because you can just give the word and it'll happen. You can heal that servant of mine." So he trusts in him. But he also knows that he's going to do this for him, which is why he says you can heal my servant. Just say the word, and it will be done. Those three together make a living faith.

So why do we talk then also about a strong faith as opposed to a weak one? Well, because you have here in these two examples of the leper and the centurion amazingly strong faith, so strong in fact that Jesus himself is amazed that he says "Not even in Israel have I found such faith!" So how is it that this centurion can have such a strong faith when it seems like we struggle, when it seems like our faith is often so weak and wondering what God is going to do?

I think it comes back to those three pieces again, because if one of those pieces is weaker than it should be, the whole thing is also weak. So if I don't know, really know, who God is--Maybe I know a little bit about him, enough to know that he exists, but then I don't know anything else--how am I going to trust in him? How am I going to know what he's capable of, what he can do for me, because I just don't know who he is? So faith could be weak in that way. It could also be weak because I just don't trust him as much. Maybe I think what he's promising is impossible, that he's not going to be able to do it. And for that reason my faith becomes weak.

But honestly, Christians, I think it really comes down to that third one. Because I think that's where most of us struggle most of the time. How do I know that God has done these things for me individually? I know what he's done in the past. I know what he's capable of. But why does it seem like he's so far away from me? That's often the question that we have, isn't it? Why does it seem like God is not listening when I pray to him? Why does it seem like everyone else is having things go so well for them, but I struggle and fall? Why does it seem like God is not going to keep his promises to me? I think that's the real reason why our faith is often so weak, because we forget that God has done these things for me and for you personally.

So how do we strengthen that faith? How do we increase that so that we no longer doubt or wonder? Well, it's not through something that we do, as if we could will ourselves to have more faith. No, Christians, it happens the same way you came to faith in the first place: when you received the Word of the Lord and received his holy sacraments. Do you want to know who the Lord is? Turn to his Word, that Word which is powerful and living and active, and that Word which will tell you who God is and who he has revealed himself to be in his Son Jesus Christ. And do you want to increase your trust in the Lord? Turn to his Word, because here you will see the promises that he made to his people over and over again, and how he kept those promises, even when his people didn't fully trust in him. You want to know how to know that this all applies to you individually, personally? Come to his Word. Come to his holy sacraments. Because here in his holy church, he tells you that these things have been done for you individually. When he gave you himself in Baptism, baptizing you in the Holy Spirit, he called you by name, your own name. And when you come to the Lord's Supper and he gives you the very body and blood of his Son, he gives it to you personally this day. And the promises that we hear again and again

in his holy Word are all directed towards you. God is not doing these things in general or in a vacuum. God has done all of these things that he would save you personally this day.

So, dear Christians, come. Come hear his word. Come receive his holy sacraments. Jesus has done all of these things for you. God caused you to know him, God causes you to trust in him, and God speaks to you this day that your sins have been forgiven and that he is with you always. That's living faith, dear Christians, the faith which we have from God.

To him be all glory, now and forever. Amen.