

Text: Various

Title: Different Strengths of Faith

Truth: Faith in Christ is essential for salvation, but faith comes in different strengths. See if yours is as strong as it should be!

Date/Location: Wednesdays Dec. 3, 10, 17 2014, and Jan. 7, 14, 21, 28 2015

Introduction – December 3, 2014

Ask the audience to help construct a list of passages that have to do with imperfect faith or “little” faith – or even “no faith.” And that is what we did: we basically thought together about all kinds of passages that deal with imperfect faith. I seeded the conversation with passages in sections I and II below.

I. New Testament Passages on Imperfect Faith – O You of Little Faith!

The verses shown in boldface print use the word “oligopistos” or its noun form which is an adjective that means “small faith.” We are right to regard the word as a very negative description.

Matthew 6:30, Luke 12:28 – The disciples were worried about basic provisions like food and clothing which the Lord promised to provide.

Matthew 8:26 – The disciples thought they were going to die in the storm on the sea, yet they were with Jesus.

Matthew 14:15-16 – Jesus put the disciples into a situation where they had to help feed a large crowd, but they thought of only human ideas to do so.

Matthew 14:31 – Peter lost sight of the Lord as he was walking on the water, instead focusing on the danger of the wind and waves.

Matthew 16:8 – The disciples demonstrated a lack of understanding of a basic figure of speech the Lord used to warn them about the Pharisees and Sadducees. They thought he was talking about literal bread that they forgot to bring on their trip, whereas he was actually talking about the bad doctrine of those false teachers. By 16:21, they got the idea.

Matthew 17:17, 17:20 – The disciples could not cast out a demon. It took somewhat more than a tiny speck of weak faith to accomplish the supernatural job that had to be done on that particular demon. Evidently some demon-possession situations were harder than others. But the disciples faith was not fully and squarely placed on the Lord.

II. New Testament Passages About Unbelief – January 14 and 21, 2015

Mark 9:19 and Luke 9:41 use the word “apistos.” This is the word for unbelief or unbelieving. This is the same incident we saw in Matthew 17:17-20. The problem was not Jesus’ power, but the disciples lack of faith, along with that of the father, and probably a huge percentage of onlookers, Pharisees, etc.

1. Unbelief blocks entrance into God’s salvation and into His blessings, and from experiencing His mighty works. Unbelief banishes one from the presence of God forever.
2. Matthew 13:58, Mark 6:6 – Jesus not only was amazed at great faith (Matthew 8:10, Luke 7:9), like that of the centurion who would not have Jesus come to his house, but also at the utter absence of faith. He did not do many works in those towns that were full of unbelievers.

Luke 12:46 – An unbeliever will be ‘assigned to a place’ where other unbelievers (apistos) have also been sent, for eternity.

Luke 24:11 – The disciples did not believe the women’s report of the resurrection. This Greek word is apistew, the verb form that is cognate with the noun we mentioned above.

Luke 24:41 – They still couldn’t believe it (apistew)!

John 20:24-27 – Thomas is perhaps the most famous doubter of all time. He said, “I will not believe.” What a refusal! Jesus demonstrates to Thomas that his refusal to believe was foolish. Jesus commands him to be a believer instead of an unbeliever (apistos).

Acts 28:24 – Paul’s message to the Roman Jews was received well by some; but others disbelieved (apistew).

Romans 3:3 – Unbelief cannot cancel God’s faithfulness. That is something to be grateful for, because there is a lot of unbelief in and around us. The verb apistew and the noun apistos are both used in this verse. 2 Timothy 2:13 says if we are faithless (apistew), still God remains faithful (pistos).

1 Co. 6:6 – It is a sin for a believer to take another believer to court before unbelievers (apistos).

1 Co. 7:12-15 – salvation of one spouse after marriage (not a wedding with a believer and an unbeliever) leaves the marriage unequally yoked, but with a special instruction that they are to stay together unless the unbeliever (apistos) insists on leaving.

- 1 Cor. 10:27 – you may sometimes receive an invitation to a meal from someone who is not a Christian (an apistos). This text instructs how you can go about handling that.
- 1 Co. 14:22-24 – Speaking in other languages is a sign for unbelievers (apistos). Some of them may come into the church and if you are speaking tongues to yourselves, they will think you are crazy—and they would be right. But if while the gift of tongues were still available, a gifted person used that gift to tell another (unsaved) people-group of the wonderful works of God and to tell them the gospel, that was the right use of the gift. Furthermore, the tongues are a sign to the unbelievers *from which* the tongues-speaker leaves, telling them that God is moving elsewhere with His work.
- 2 Cor. 4:4 – The devil blinds the minds of the unbeliever (apistos) so they cannot see (understand) the gospel.
- 2 Co. 6:14-15 – Besides teaching about the unequal yoking of believers with unbelievers (apistos), this passage makes it clear that there is no fellowship between unbelief and belief. There is nothing in common between the two. For this reason, the portions of unbelief that remain in our lives are very inconsistent with the faith that we have in the Lord.
- 1 Tim. 5:8 – Given all these verses that we have read, there hardly seems anything that is worse than not believing. But Paul in this verse says that those who do not provide for their own family are worse than unbelievers (apistos)! Ouch. That is bad. A person who professes the faith but refuses to provide for his own family has in fact *denied* the faith, no matter what he says, and is worse than an unbeliever. The denial is in the perfect tense, indicating a past action with an ongoing state / result.
- Tit. 1:15 – The state of unbelief (apistos) is one in which everything gets turned around and even things that are not supposed to be sinful are twisted into evil.
- Rev. 21:8 – Unbelievers will have their part in the lake of fire, forever.

There are other verses which communicate the same idea without ‘apistos.’

Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Romans 11:20, 23 – In Paul’s picture of the olive tree, the nation of Israel lived in a large measure of unbelief over its history. Its branches were broken off. Anyone disconnected from this figurative tree, rooted in the promises of God, through the fathers and connected to the church, is eternally lost.

1 Timothy 1:13 – God is merciful to unbelievers, even after they do horrible things like blasphemy, persecution, and murder. Paul is an example. He turned from sin and was forgiven by God through Christ.

Hebrews 3:12 – An evil, unbelieving heart departs from the living God and from the faith in His word.

Hebrews 3:19 – The summary statement of Israel’s early history after the Exodus is that unbelief prevented them from entering into the promised land.

Acts 14:2 – The Jews at Iconium disbelieved and poisoned the minds against the Christian preachers. The word for disbelieve can also be translated as “disobeyed.”

III. New Testament Passages about Great Faith – January 21, 2015

Even though our faith as humans is imperfect, in some cases God evaluates faith as “great.” Here are some examples to encourage us.

A. Matthew 8:10 (context 8:5-13, Luke 7:9) – the centurion who believed the Lord could heal His servant with a word. The Lord marveled because he had not found any Jewish people with such faith, but this Gentile trusted the Lord and His authority enough to heal from afar. <Already covered this material in Dec 2014, but not rest of this section.>

B. Matthew 9:2 – The Lord Jesus responded to the faith He saw in a group of people who brought a paralyzed man. He pronounced forgiveness of sins on the man who was paralyzed. This was scandalous to the scribes and led to another part of the story, but we should not overlook the fact that these people had *faith*. How did Jesus “see” their faith? He does have supernatural power to know what is in someone’s heart (John 2:24-25). But also, their faith was evident in that they actually *did* something by moving their physical bodies to be near Jesus and, whether verbally or not, asking Jesus to heal the man. Faith does work, as James 2 teaches.

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C. Matthew 9:21 – a woman says to herself if she can only touch the garment of Jesus, she will be made well. There is a kind of faith there that is strong. But like the case of the paralyzed man, her faith is also demonstrated to be strong because it “did” something.

D. Matthew 15:28 (context 15:21-28) – a Canaanite woman requested the Lord to heal her daughter. She believed that He would despite the fact that she was not a Jew—and that the Lord’s ministry was almost exclusively toward His own people.

- E. Romans 4:20 – Abraham did not “waver” at the promise of God. He would have wavered if he had unbelief, but he was strengthened in faith. The promise from God gave an opportunity for Abraham to increase His faith by believing it. It would be good for us to look at God’s promises and even the challenges of life by reminding ourselves that they are opportunities to learn to trust God more (2 Cor. 1:9).
- F. Related is the idea of “great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” in 1 Timothy 3:13. Such a pronouncement is made upon those who serve well as deacons. I believe it is true that in our kind of church, to step into the role of deacon or elder takes great faith, and it stretches the officeholder’s faith as well. Note the following Biblical example.
- G. Acts 6:5 – the first deacon, Stephen, was “full of faith.” That sounds like great faith to me.
- H. 2 Timothy 1:5 – Timothy’s grandmother and mother had “genuine” or “sincere” faith. It was the real deal.
- I. Mary and Martha had great faith that if the Lord had been with them, Lazarus would not have died. But they did not have strong enough faith to believe that Jesus could raise him up now, *not after four days!* See John 11:21, 32, 39. Let us develop this thought. So it is with us sometimes:
1. We have great faith in the abstract. Jesus, if you had been here! Or I know he will rise again in the last day, way in the future (v. 24). As such, it is impossible to go back in time or forward in time to really test us.
 2. But when it comes to the concrete we falter. Now you are here! In the present situation, do you have faith in the Lord of all flesh?
 3. Notice the difference: One side: speaking abstractly, if someone gets sick, the Lord can heal them or the Lord can give the grace to persevere and die well. The other side: “I am sick right now. I’m not so sure...”
 4. Let us ask God to grant faith in Him that does not waver or falter, but grows stronger all the time.

IV. Unbelief in the Old Testament – December 17, 2014 briefly

- A. Job is a realistic picture of a godly man who had great faith at the start of his deep trial, but then grew weaker over time. His faith faded in and out. At the end of chapter 19 he shows very deep trust in the Lord.

- B. An opposite example is that of Jonah. If “trust and obey” is the motto of a Christian, Jonah didn’t cut it. He did not trust, nor did he obey.
- C. The Jews also failed to trust God when he told them to conquer the land. In Numbers 13:31-33 and 14:1-4 they complained that they would rather have died in the wilderness, and they should return back to Egypt. They began to take steps to accomplish that sinful goal.

V. Great Faith in the Old Testament – December 10, 2014

- A. It was interesting that in a quick search I did not find “unbelief” to occur in the OT at all. It was also interesting that the word “faith” in the English translation only occurs TWICE in the OT – Deuteronomy 32:20 and Habakkuk 2:4. There are many related words, however, such as ‘fear’ that indicate a person with a right response to God. To give a more complete picture, I should also mention that the word “believe” or “believed” occurs in the OT of the ESV 38 times and in the NKJV 43 times.
- B. It occurred to me that what is going on in the OT is that faith is not talked about in the abstract. It is demonstrated in the concrete. So the faith of people is shown (or lack thereof) by their actions. Hebrews 11 shows this very vividly with example after example of the faith-living of the people.
- C. Widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. To Ahab, Elijah had predicted/called for a drought over the land. It was to last for three and a half years (James 5:17). The situation became desperate throughout the land. Elijah himself had to follow special instructions by God to avoid starving, which included a provision of food from ravens. That may not have been the most pleasant way to get provisions, but it was sustenance! In 1 Kings 17:9, the Lord told Elijah to go to a widow there who would supply him with food. Perhaps this widow was wealthy? Not so! In verse 15, the text says that “she did according to the word of Elijah.” This is faith in action! See also Luke 4:26.
- D. The Shunammite woman. In 2 Kings 4:8-17 the prominent woman of Shunem provided hospitality and a room for Elisha as he came through their city frequently. God gave her a special blessing of a son for her reward. But then the son died. She went to Elisha and asked him to come. She *expected*, not just asked, that he come and raise her son from the dead, because she believed that he was not going to “deceive” her (4:16, 28).
- E. We could read Hebrews 11 again and remind ourselves of the great faith of the OT saints.

VI. Repentant Faith – December 17, 2014

- A. Recently I spoke about John the Baptist’s ministry, and focused upon, among other things, his message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” I said that repentance is necessary today, just as it was back then.
- B. Some Christian teachers deny the need for repentance today. For example, Bob Wilkin writes, “I do not believe that repentance, defined in the sense of turning from sins, is a condition of regeneration or justification.”¹ Part of the problem is that teachers such as Wilkin are not careful to distinguish from turning from sins and turning from sin (singular). His idea is that there are Christians running around saying, “You have to quit every sin you do before you can be saved.” That is what he understands by “turning from sins” and thus he says they believe salvation comes by works + faith.
- C. Defined properly, repentance is a vital element of true belief. What those “Christians are running around saying” is that a person has to have a fundamental shift in his mindset, where he turns away from sin as a lifestyle; where he hates sin; where he understands that it displeases God; where he doesn’t want to do sins. It is not that he must have perfect behavior before he can be saved; he must have a new mindset, a new direction.
- D. In this sense, there is a only thin difference between “turning from sin” and “turning from sins,” because the man who has turned from sin in his heart will inevitably turn from individual acts of sin as the Lord helps him. But I see a difference, and this difference clarifies that we do *not* believe in works salvation. Perish the thought of doing works to earn favor with God! Similarly, perish the thought of the cessation of certain works to earn favor with God!
- E. We teach that faith alone saves, and the *kind* of faith we are talking about is the kind that recognizes one’s own sinfulness and causes an attitude that wants to turn away from sin. That attitude is called *repentance*.
- F. This is justified by passages such as Acts 19:4 about John the Baptist’s ministry, and Mark 1:15 (about Jesus’ ministry). Furthermore, Acts 20:21 teaches that Paul’s message consisted of testifying “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” The homerun passage in support of the “repentant faith” view is probably Hebrews 6:1, which

¹ http://www.faithalone.org/magazine/y2005/05_56_1.html

enjoins the readers to leave the basic teachings of the faith and move on to maturity. Among the basic teachings we are supposed to “get” and “move on” from are repentance from dead works and faith toward God.

G. If you keep in mind the single idea of “repentant faith” you will be on the mark and in full agreement with the only gospel that saves.

VII. Self-Confident Faith – December 10, 2014

Peter asserted he would never deny the Lord. See Matthew 26:33, 35, 70-75. His faith was confident, but it was in himself ultimately, not humbly placed in the Lord.

VIII. What Should I do if my Faith is Imperfect? – January 7, 2015

The Bible has the answer!

A. First of all, rejoice and do not despair.

1. Imperfect faith needs work. But we can be thankful that imperfect faith in Christ is not equal to “no faith.” Even in a small amount, faith is powerful because of the object of the faith = Jesus Christ and God the Father. Rejoice if you have mustard-seed sized small faith. Even a smaller portion of faith in Christ is good! The apostle Paul consistently gives thanks to God for his converts’ faith, and so should we for our own faith and that of others (2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:13).

2. You are not perfect, and nothing about you yourself is perfect except your standing before God as a perfectly justified person through faith in Christ. If you objectively and realistically realize that, then you will be able to avoid depression over your own spiritual state. Get over yourself and move on to the next level of sanctification!

B. Second, after being thankful for what God has done in you and recognizing your deficiencies, ask God for help. Have a God-seeking faith. That is what faith really is—a thought, a behavior, a willingness, a decision, all to look to God for everything. Practice that God-centeredness.

1. A believing man with a demon-possessed child asked the Lord to help his unbelief (Mark 9:24).

2. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith in light of the matter of forgiveness (Luke 17:5). Ditto for us, because we always need to be able to faithfully forgive when we are wronged.

C. Third, cultivate a self-examining faith.

1. Matthew 26:22 – the disciples asked the Lord if they were the one that would betray Jesus.
 2. According to 2 Cor. 13:5 – We are all supposed to put ourselves to the test to see if we are in the faith.
- D. Fourth, follow Biblical examples during your own trials.
1. For example, in Romans 4:20 the Bible says Abraham was strengthened faith. The trial that he faced—not being able to have a child to fulfill the promise of God—was an opportunity for him to turn his faith away from himself toward God.
 2. Another biblical example is Paul when he faced a deadly trial. The precise nature of the trial is not specified in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, but he said that he despaired even of life. But what this did was to drive Paul to not trust in himself but in God. And why should he not trust in God—because God raises the dead! Even if Paul should die, he would once again be raised, either immediately after the trial as in a miraculous recovery, or eventually at the rapture. In this case, Paul learned the trust and also was delivered from the trial (v. 10).
- D. Fifth, obey Biblical commands about improving your faith. For example:
1. 2 Peter 1:5 commands every believer to “add to your faith.” A series of additive attributes are specified after this, indicating that faith is at the base of them, but is in some sense incomplete if it stands alone.
 2. 2 Peter 3:18 exhorts that we grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior. This is not exactly the same as saying “grow in faith” but anyone who has experienced more of God’s favor and knows Him better will have a stronger faith.
 3. Paul exhorts that believers must stand firm in the faith (1 Cor. 16:13). The idea is to be firmly committed, to have convictions, not to be wishy-washy or blow about by every teaching that happens to come by.
 4. Be joyful when you fall into trials because of what you know will happen to your faith if you respond properly (James 1:2-3).

May this kind of growing faith be ours as well!

Conclusion

Do you have imperfect faith? Great faith? Regardless of our “performance” or strength of faith, the object of the Christian’s faith is perfect and great beyond description. Thanks be to God!

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