

How to know if faith is living.

Text: Colossians 1:3-8 for 6/17/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— ⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. ⁷You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

What can you look for to tell if something is alive or not? The top three criteria for determining if something is alive is to check if the object breaths, if it takes in nutrients (eats), and if it grows. We can apply these criteria to different objects to determine whether or not the object is alive. For example: A rock does not breath, it does not eat, and it does not grow, so we recognize a rock is not alive. A plant, on the other hand does “breath” in that it takes in oxygen from the air and gives off carbon dioxide. Plants take in nutrients from the soil, and plants grow, so we can say that plants are alive.

How do you know if your faith is alive? We certainly can't use the same criteria that we use on the things of this world because we cannot see our faith. So how can we know if our faith is alive or not? To determine that we can look at what the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Colossi. From Paul's words we can learn ...

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1. It grows.
2. It loves.

Living things grow. Faith is a living thing, and it grows in connection with God's Word of truth, especially the gospel. Paul writes, “**All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth**” (v. 6). From the day the Colossian Christians heard about God's grace in Christ their faith was alive and growing. At first, their faith was small and needed a great deal of care and attention, like a newborn child. For a child to grow that child needs to eat.

Our son Robert, from the time he was born until he was twelve years old, did not typically eat much. He was a fussy baby and a picky eater all his childhood years. Because of that he didn't grow much. But when Robert turned thirteen something changed. His appetite kicked in, and when it did he started to grow. Robert was soon eating everything in sight, and as he ate he grew. The skinny little child, who would almost disappear if you turned him sideways, has now grown to the point where it is almost impossible to miss his six-foot four-inch frame when he walks in the room.

To grow your faith also needs to eat. It needs to feed on God's word. And as it grows it needs to move from the milk of gospel basics, to the solid food of all of God's word. The writer to the Hebrews says, “**Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil**” (Hebrews 5:13-14). Do you want to correctly distinguish between good and evil in your life? Do you want to make good and God pleasing decisions? Then your faith needs to regularly feed on a complete diet of God's word; both his law and his gospel. Just like your body, your faith needs to eat every day!

How often are you feeding your faith? Daily? Maybe a couple time a week? Or is your faith only fed once a week in worship? If you are feeding on God's word daily, are you taking in enough of that word for your faith to grow? Are we filling up on God's word, or are we spending more time filling up on the junk food of worldly wisdom and popular knowledge? Does God's word guide your

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thoughts and decisions, or does pop culture and an ever-changing sea of emotions guide and direct what you think and do?

Worldly knowledge and wisdom are like plants that have soaked up poison from the ground. They may look good, sound good, and even “taste” good because it makes us feel good. Yet those “plants” are poisoned by sin. Relying on the “food” of worldly knowledge to sustain your faith will leave you with a faith that is shrinking and dying.

We need to repent of that foolishness. When we sinfully feed our faith with worldly words instead of God’s word, then we need to recognize that sin and turn away from it. While our faith is still alive we need to turn back to the Almighty One who created our faith and ask for his forgiveness for our mistreatment of his gift of faith to us. We need to turn, again, to Jesus to receive his complete forgiveness. Trusting in Christ’s saving grace we pray for the desire to fill our faith with the pure food of God’s holy word.

As we fill ourselves more and more with Christ’s life-giving word we will find that our faith not only grows, but that it also produces fruit. These fruits of faith are things that people hear about and give thanks for. Just as Paul said of the Colossians, **“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus”** (v. 3). Paul heard about the Colossian’s faith from Epaphras. Where would people hear of our fruits of faith? One place is in worship. When we join in worship we hear the voices of our fellow believers confessing their sins, proclaiming God’s glory, and singing his praises. As we hear that testimony of faith coming from the lips of our fellow Christians we give thanks for one another. We thank God for giving us a church family that believes like we do; people who are willing to worship and serve with us in God’s kingdom. When we see each other’s faith producing fruits of confession, and worship, and witness we come to know that faith is living, active, and growing among us.

As faith grows it bears fruit. While the fruits that faith produce are many and varied, the main fruit that comes from faith is the fruit of love. That fruit of love springs from the hope of heaven that is proclaimed to us in the gospel. Paul makes a connection between faith, hope, and love when he writes, **“The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel”** (v. 5). The gospel gives us hope. That hope is the confident expectation of what is waiting for us in heaven. That hope of heaven moves our faith produces fruits of love. Through the gospel God has promised us an unending life of joy and peace in his heavenly home. That life is ours because Jesus, God’s Son, sacrificed his life to save us from the sins that would keep us out of heaven. Through Christ’s saving work God gives us everything we need for our spiritual lives.

Knowing that our greatest need is cared for and that eternal riches are waiting for us in heaven, our hearts of faith are moved to love. The love of God that gives us hope prompts our faith to produce fruits of love. As scripture says, **“We love because he first loved us”** (1 John 4:19). And that love is directed especially toward our fellow believers. Paul writes, **“We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints”** (vs. 4).

The saints Paul speaks of are our fellow believers. Notice that Paul says the Colossian’s faith moved them to love *all* the saint. Do you love all of your fellow believers? Could you honestly say that you love every believer who is sitting in this church right now? That’s hard, isn’t it? There are always those people whose personality rubs us the wrong way. There are people whom we don’t agree with when it comes to how the church is run, or what ministries we carry out. We may even grumble and complain about these people with whom we share the exact same faith, people who confess Jesus as their Savior, just like we do.

How hard it is to love others, even fellow believers. It’s hard, but it’s not impossible. When

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those feelings of discord and animosity start creeping into our church family we need to go back to the one who brought us into his family. We need to go back to Jesus and lay those sinful thoughts and feelings at the foot of his cross. Then we need to take a good hard look at that cross. The blood on that cross should have been ours. The condemnation and hell Christ suffered there should have been ours. Instead, Jesus died to free us from those sins and the guilt that comes with them. Through the eyes of faith, we have seen Jesus' saving cross. In faith we have heard the hollow echo of Jesus' open tomb. It echoes because it is empty. Death could not hold Jesus, and his empty tomb assures us that death will not hold us either. One day we will stand with all believers, even those we didn't always love, and we will praise our Lord for his salvation.

The love our Lord has shown us moves our faith to share that same love with those who are closest to us. What does that love look like? It looks rather plain, actually. It is the love a parent shows to their child, providing for that child's needs and bringing them up in the faith of the Lord. It is the love children show to their parents, especially to their fathers on this Father's Day, honoring their parents as God would want them to. It is the husband or wife who lovingly cares for their spouse who is sick or dying, reminding their spouse often of Jesus' forgiveness and the mansions he has gone to prepare for all his believers. It is the love of a grandparent who willingly continues to share their faith down to the third and fourth generation. And it is a love that goes even further. It is a love that sees the needs of others, especially the needs of fellow believers, and that love does what it can to provide for that need.

Ultimately, it is a love that is directed at people's souls. It is a faith that loves others because it sees them for who they are: People for whom Jesus died to save them from their sins; people for whom Christ has won eternal life. Our love is God's love. The love of God that flows through us is the evidence that helps us know our faith is alive.

Your faith is a living thing. Feed it with God's word, and nurture it with the gospel. Let it grow, and then let it go. Let it go out to love those around you, just as Christ has loved you. Let Jesus' saving and forgiving love be what drives your love, as you hold on to the hope of the everlasting life Jesus is preparing for you. Amen.