

Faith. It is a common word, we hear it all the time, we use it all the time. But what is it? For many, faith is a decision of the mind; a conscious choice that is made by a person. You've probably been asked questions like "Have you made Jesus your personal Lord?" "Have you accepted Christ as your Savior?" Others equate faith with mere intellectual knowledge - so as long as you assent to a series of facts, that is what makes you a believer. Still others say that Christian faith is simply saying, "Well, whatever the Church believes, that's what I believe," without even knowing what a particular church confesses, let alone examining it against God's Word. And yet others say that faith, while a gift of God, must be accompanied by our activity, our works of love, in order to be fully united to Christ and to be saved. That is to say, faith is the start, and it can only be given by God, but you must do your part to keep and strengthen it, and thereby you are saved.

Well, what is faith as we see it taught in the Bible? How does Jesus speak of it? And what does this faith do? That is what we see today. It's important to note first of all that today's Gospel immediately follows the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5 begins: "**Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And He opened his mouth and taught them...**" And for three entire chapters, 5, 6, and 7, Jesus teaches the crowd. These three chapters are the most quoted portion of the New Testament. Much of it is heard every year throughout the course of the regular Gospel readings in church.

Jesus speaks the Beatitudes, the blessedness which He, the blessed One, bestows. He goes through the Law of Moses, teaching that the commandments are not just broken by the acts of the hand, but also by the thoughts of the heart and words of the mouth. In this teaching He drives us to confess our sins, to repentance and faith in Him as our far greater righteousness. He is the one, the only one, who has kept all the commandments of God perfectly in our place.

He speaks of loving enemies and praying for those who persecute us, as we see Him do from the cross. He warns us against practicing outward acts of godliness just for show and the acclamations of men, for He is the one who does not exalt, but who humbles Himself, who came for us as a lowly servant. He teaches us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, enabling us to pray in Him as children of the Father. He tells us to put our hearts with our true treasure: Him and His word. He counsels us to not be anxious but rather to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. He warns us against judging others, to remove the plank from our own eye before griping about the speck in our neighbor's. He exhorts us to ask that it may be given, to seek that we may find, to knock that the door may be opened. He gives the Golden Rule, speaks of the narrow gate, warns against false prophets, speaks of Himself as the Son of the Father and eternal judge. And He ends by speaking of building our house upon the rock, that is to say, we build our lives, we stake everything, on Jesus' word.

And "**when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.**" Jesus comes down from the mountain. The crowds which heard His preaching follow Him. What does Jesus' teaching prompt? Does He teach us that we must give our hearts to Him? Does He give a list of facts to which we simply need to assent? Does He speak of works that we must do in order to be saved? We see the result of Jesus' preaching in two men. Two very different men. The first is a leper. We've heard many times what being a leper meant. This outcast comes before the Lord, and having heard Jesus preach with such authority, he simply says, "**Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.**"

This leper knows his need. Not just his dire physical condition, but also what that affliction manifests: his sin. He knows what he needs to be delivered from and he's heard from Jesus' own lips His claim to be God, the one who shows mercy and whose Father considers us of far more value the birds of the air and flowers of the field. The leper has been listening to Jesus preach. This is what creates faith. The Word of God. And where does faith lead? What does faith do? It drives the leper to Jesus. Everything he needs is given in Jesus. Faith leads us to Jesus. It makes us want to be where Jesus is.

The faith of this leper teaches us something else about faith. It trusts God's good and gracious will. In the Lord's Prayer we pray "Thy will be done." The Catechism teaches us to confess that "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow

God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will." His will above all things is to bring you to faith and preserve you in that faith, to defend you against the forces which would undermine and kill that faith.

The leper didn't just hear Jesus' preaching and have faith, he heard Jesus give the Lord's Prayer. He prays here in faith, "Thy will be done." **"Lord, if You will..."** Faith trusts in God's good and gracious will. Whatever God does He does because He is good and gracious. We recognize this as Christians when God gives His good gifts of healing, of new life, of a better job to support ourselves and our families. But it is also true, it is especially true and important to know and trust that whatever God does not do, He does not do because He is good and gracious.

Faith doesn't put God on trial. Faith doesn't tell God what He wants to do. Faith is born in humility. Faith doesn't give orders to God where God has not spoken. It lives on God's Word. It trusts in what God says, what He has promised, and commends all needs and cares to Him. Faith is always related to God's Word. That's what the fact that today's Gospel immediately follows Jesus' preaching shows us. The leper lives on the words Jesus has spoken. He knows that Jesus is the divine Son of God, full of compassion, with the power to heal and to save from sin. The leper knows that. Because Jesus has said so. His will for him is good. What the leper doesn't know if it is good for him at that time to be made clean of his leprosy. He commends his need to a Lord whose will for him is good. He trusts in that good and gracious will.

So also the Roman Centurion. He has heard word of Jesus and His preaching. Luke's Gospel tells us that explicitly (Lk 7:3). He trusts entirely in the power, the authority of Jesus' word, and its ability to do what it says. He confesses himself, a Gentile and a sinner, to be unworthy of even having the Lord come under his roof. He is not a Jew, not an heir of the bloodline of Abraham, yet faith teaches him that if Jesus teaches all that He has, if He is who He says He is, then He is not just the God of the Jews, but the Savior of all. So in faith the centurion commends his need, his servant, to the mercy and word of Jesus. Here again we see what faith is. It comes from hearing the Word of God. We see that it is trust. Not a decision of the mind or will, but the living trust of the heart, which flees to Jesus as the answer to every need, trusting that His will for us is always good. Such faith does not boast in itself, but in Christ alone, as the object; He alone is the one who is great and mighty in His mercy.

"Thy will be done" is the most difficult of the seven petitions to pray. It is not faith that butts up against this notion. It is that unbelieving old Adam in us. That struggle we each have is what makes it difficult for us. It is difficult to commend life's real troubles to God, saying, "You take care of it. You will, God, and however You do, I know that it is for my good." It takes a whole life to begin to learn to not only pray that but to believe it. But this doesn't need to be scary. A Christian has no need to fear praying this. **"Lord, if You will, You can make me clean."** Yes, and if He wills it not, this does not mean that He doesn't love you. It doesn't mean that He is not good to you. It doesn't mean that He is not gracious to you. Faith trusts God's wisdom in how He shows Himself to be good and gracious.

In midst of what we do not know, where we do not always see how it is that our Lord is at work, where we are not told in His Word what His will in each and every particular situation is, God does give us His Word with clear promises of what He does and what He will do. And we can rest assured He will do it. He cannot lie. He cannot forget what He has promised, and He cannot break a promise He makes. Having His word on something makes it utterly certain. Having heard His Word, we come in faith, entrusting our days and burdens to Him even as He comes to us speaking His kindly word of forgiveness.

Whether your pay increase is granted and the mountain of bills is lessened or not, He has promised to give you daily bread, all that you need to support this body and life. The best way that He reminds you of that, is when you receive your daily bread from the hands of caring brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether your disease is cured or not, your soul is cleansed. Whether the life of your loved one or even your own is spared or not, you have the promise of the life of the world to come. You, along with the Jewish leper, that Gentile centurion, and countless others, will be gathered together **"and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."** Through all things our Father in heaven is working to bring us to the glory of the resurrection. That is where we are headed. That is what the Lord Jesus has promised you. By His grace and the power of His Spirit in His Word, that is what you lay hold of by faith.