

Faith that Pleases God

Hebrews 11:4-7

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We've seen how the writer of Hebrews offers a confession of faith, a description of faith. Then he says it was faith that enabled the believers of ancient times to be commended by God. He goes on to say that it's by faith that we understand God to be Creator—that what we see was made from what's not seen.

Then the writer seems to decide that instead of trying to explain faith, he'll show us what faith looks like. He begins to give examples of the faith he's described. Some people call this chapter the "Faith Hall of Fame." Again and again, the writer says, "by faith," and then recalls some character from Israel's history who showed faith. The point of this list is to encourage those who read it to have faith like they did—to imitate them. The writer wants to inspire us with these examples.

In the section we're looking at today, we see three examples and a statement about the importance of faith. Verse 6 states that without faith it is impossible to please God. The examples show people who did please God or were approved by God. God testifies about their faith.

Why is pleasing God important? Why do we need to or want to please God? Why do we need God's approval?

Well, for one thing, this is God we're talking about. The Lord God, the creator, the one who holds everything together, the one who knows how life is meant to be, the ruler of all—this is the One we aim to please.

Some people have ideas about God that make God impossible to please. In their minds, God always frowns with disapproval. We wonder, how much faith does it take to please God? And we figure we'll never have enough.

Part of the good news in Jesus is that God is already pleased with us. He created us and he's delighted that we're part of his creation. God is sad and angry when we reject him and his ways because he knows that life apart from him doesn't work. But God is always for us and ready to

welcome us. Even when we reject God's love or don't think we deserve it, God keeps loving us.

There's an old story about an Irishman who was saying his prayers—and saying them with unusual familiarity and love. Someone commented on this and the man said, "The Father of Jesus is very fond of me."

In the novel *The Shack*, a man named Mac has a vision or dream where the Trinity appears to him. One of the things God tells Mac in this encounter is, "I am especially fond of you!"

Can you believe God is fond of you? This is the God we seek to please. We want to have faith that pleases God who already cares so much for us.

If we wonder how much faith it takes, remember Jesus' words about mustard seeds (Matthew 17:20). It doesn't take a lot of faith to experience God. Faith in itself isn't the point. Faith is kind of like a window that lets us see out and lets light shine in. Faith is meaningless and useless unless it looks out on something specific. Faith has to be *in* something or someone.

Faith means totally relying on God, and committing ourselves to God, for time and eternity, trusting his promises, obeying his commands, not trying to make ourselves good enough for him but trusting the fact that he accepts us as we are because of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. (Tom Wright, *Small Faith, Great God* 27)

Faith isn't vague optimism or a general religious approach to life. Faith rests on God's being and character. We believe that God is and that God is a rewarder of those who seek him. Faith is believing and trusting in the God who made us and who has shown us what he's like in Jesus. The life of Jesus shows us that God is holy and almighty. The death of Jesus shows us that God is loving and merciful. The resurrection of Jesus shows us that God gives new life.

We don't need great faith because we have faith in a great God (Wright 27-28).

Now let's look at three examples of faith that pleases God. They all come from the early chapters of Genesis, from the early days of human history.

By faith, Abel's offering pleased God. Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve. The brothers brought offerings to God. God accepted Abel's but God was not pleased with Cain's offering. Genesis isn't really clear why one was accepted and one wasn't. Abel is mentioned a few other times in Scripture and it seems that his offering was approved more because of the integrity of his heart than because of what he gave. Hebrews lifts up Abel as an example because he and his sacrifice were pleasing to God. Faith makes a difference. Abel made his offering in faith and, apparently, Cain didn't.

Motivation is important. I remember a movie we saw years ago. Early in the story, this couple hosted a dinner party. Afterward, the woman complained to the man about his attitude toward doing dishes. He helped do them, but she said he should want to do them. He asked, "Why would I *want* to do dishes?" As a man, I related to that. Just do the job—it doesn't matter why. But thinking about that, I realize that attitude and motivation do matter. Nobody wants to do the dishes. At the same time, we do want to because that shows caring and commitment to the other person, to the relationship. We want to do what's needed to make life good, to make it work for both of us.

Why do we give ourselves to God? Why do we give anything to God? What's our attitude? What's our motivation? Are we trying to get God's attention? Are we trying to earn points with the Lord? Or is it because we know God is fond of us, that God loves us no matter what, and we know that commitment to him is the best way to live? We're overcome with gratitude for God's generosity and we want to give ourselves in thanks and praise.

When David was king of Israel, he wanted to buy some property to build an altar to the Lord. The owner said he would give the land to David. But David replied, "I will not give that which costs me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24).

Jesus watched people giving their offerings in the temple. He saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins and he said, "I tell you the truth,

this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:1-4).

The apostle Paul commented on the generosity of a group of believers. He said that "they gave themselves first to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 8:5).

In another place Paul says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

Will we give ourselves, give our hearts, give all that we are to the Lord by faith?

The next example is a mysterious figure named Enoch. *By faith, Enoch's walk pleased God.* In a long list of people in Genesis 5, Enoch stands out. It says about each of the others that they lived a number of years, "and then he died." That phrase, "then he died," keeps repeating. But then it says, "Enoch walked with God, then he was no more, because God took him away" (verse 24). The writer of Hebrews says that means Enoch didn't die, but God translated him or took him directly to glory. Because before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. He walked with God. He pleased God. His walk with God was pleasing to God.

How do we walk with God? We live our whole life with God. If we've given our lives, our whole self to God, we live all of life, every moment, with God, in relationship with God. Nothing about who we are and what we do is outside our relationship with God.

In our survey about faith, someone asked, "Is it possible to be a good Christian while being a good businessman?" They went on to express a negative view of business as simply trying to get as much money from people as possible. But if we're walking with God and seeking to please God, that's not the goal of our life. How about a different view of business that sees it as helping, serving, providing goods and services for others?

An online devotional that I read is from the writings of Dallas Willard. Not many days ago, the title was *Doing "Good" Business Is a Way to Share God's Love*. It's a short paragraph, so I'll share it with you:

Business is an amazingly effective means of delivering God's love to the world by loving, serving, and providing for one another. God loves the world (John 3:16) and because he does, he has arranged the enterprise and organization of business as a primary moving force to demonstrate this love throughout human history. Thus, the field of business and its unique knowledge fall perfectly into what can and should be understood as an essential realm of human activity that can and must come under the influence and control of God's benevolent reign. (From *The Divine Conspiracy Continued*. Dallas Willard Daily Devotional www.biblegateway.com)

Business is a place to see God at work, to walk with God and please God by doing good and serving others. School and labor and family life—wherever we are is the arena to put faith into action, to walk with God and please God.

This is where the reminder comes that without faith it's impossible to please God. At the very least, we need to believe that God is, that God exists. We affirm this every week when we say, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." And we need to believe that God wants to interact with us, have a relationship with us, wants to be generous to us. That kind of belief is the starting point for life with God.

Faith also involves listening to God and doing what he says. The third example here is Noah. *By faith, Noah's obedience pleased God.* Just about everybody's heard of Noah and the Ark. We make it a fun children's story because of all the interesting animals. But if you read Genesis 6-9, you see that it's a story of judgment. God is grieved over the sin and violence of people and basically decides to start over with creation. But a man named Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. God spoke to Noah and "warned him about things not seen." That reminds us of Hebrews 11:1. God warned Noah about the coming flood. So in holy fear, in reverence, Noah built an ark for the salvation of his household.

Faith obeys God when it seems foolish. Faith builds the ark long before the rain starts. Imagine the ridicule Noah got. What's he doing building a floating zoo in the middle of a desert?

By faith Noah also condemned the world. There's a biblical tradition that sees Noah as a preacher of repentance (see 2 Peter 2:5). This line in Hebrews implies that when a person has firm faith and faithfulness, their life itself rebukes a godless generation (William Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol 4b: *Hebrews 9-13*).

Noah was the first to act in faith based on a message from God. His building the ark bore witness to the unseen God and God's Word. It also rebuked the unbelieving generation Noah lived in. There's a stark contrast between their unbelief and Noah's stance of faith toward God. "As one who lived by faith, or confident boldness, with regard to God's Word, he became an heir of righteousness" (George Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*).

Are we willing to believe that God makes his will known in the Bible and especially through Jesus? Are we willing to obey what God says? Are we willing to rely on the power of God's Spirit to enable us to obey? That's another part of the faith that pleases God.

Paul says that we make it our goal to please the Lord (2 Cor 5:9). Whatever the circumstances, wherever we are, our goal is pleasing God. Because that's where real life is. Because that's what we're made for. That's why God came to us, comes to us, to remake us. In some way, God's already pleased with us and he invites us to live into his pleasure, his approval, his acceptance.

One of my favorite movie scenes is from *Chariots of Fire*. It came out in the early 80s and it's the story of some Olympic runners in the early 1920s. Eric Liddell was born in China to a missionary family from Scotland. He went to school and was trained in England. He's preparing to go back to China to teach and preach and serve. But Eric's also a great runner and he's been recruited for Britain's Olympic team. His sister fears that if he pursues racing, he'll abandon the mission.

Eric tells her, "Jenny, I know God made me for a purpose—for China. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."

Eric Liddell did run in the 1924 summer Olympics. He was a witness to his faith as he refused to run on a Sunday. But he won gold in a different race. Later, he did return to China as a missionary. During World War II, he

spent a couple of years in a prison camp. By all accounts, he was a witness and servant in that place. He had the chance to go free, but he gave it to a pregnant woman instead. He died with a brain tumor in that camp in February 1945.

When we live by faith, we feel God's pleasure. When we give ourselves to God, we feel his pleasure. When we walk with God every day, we feel God's pleasure. When we obey God's word, we feel his pleasure. And we do all that in response to God's great grace, God's love, God's fondness for us.