

Faith, Works, and Beliefs

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Good morning! This morning I will be talking about faith, works, and beliefs. I am not a Bible scholar or a theologian. Like you, I am a Christian on a faith journey. I think of myself as a practicing Christian, because I want to put my faith into practice, and also because I am not very good at it, so I have to keep practicing. What I will be sharing this morning is a set of ideas that have helped me on my faith journey. I hope that these ideas will be helpful to you as well.

So let's take a look at faith, works, and beliefs. Let's start with faith. What is faith? It can be defined as trust and confidence in God. It means trusting in God even when we do not understand what God is doing. Faith is our response to God's self-revelation. Faith connects us to God and makes our relationship with God possible.

When we live by faith, we can sense God's presence. We can see God moving in our lives and the lives of those around us. We can see God in the natural world. We can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in our loving relationships with our families and friends. We can hear the call of Christ when we take up our crosses and serve others. Our faith makes miracles possible. Jesus told us that our faith can move mountains.

Faith is not about the material world that can be measured and tested by science. It is not about what we see physically, but what we see spiritually. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "we live by faith, not by sight." Hebrews 11:1 tells us that "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

So we must have faith to have a relationship with God. But it is not enough to have faith. Our faith must flow into our deeds. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul tells us that "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

This is not about earning one's way to heaven. As Rick Warren pointed out, "you're not saved *by* service, but you are saved *for* service." We should be so

grateful for our salvation that we want to demonstrate our faith through our service— our good works. Those good works can make our faith come alive. As we read at James 2:14-17:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

We find a similar message in 1 John 3:17-18:

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

So we must have faith and we must act on our faith. Our faith must flow into our deeds. Then what should we do? Jesus gave us two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are not only commanded to love, we are also called to serve. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, as an example of how we are to serve each other. At Luke 22:27 he said: “I am among you as one who serves.”

We are to follow his example. We read in 1 Peter 4:10: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” These acts of love and service are the good works that Paul described in Ephesians— the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

For centuries, there has been a great deal of argument over the relative importance of faith and works. Martin Luther, who started the Protestant reformation five hundred years ago, thought the church of his day placed too much emphasis on works, and not enough on faith. It is not a surprise that Protestantism has grown to emphasize faith. As a result, some Protestants put very little emphasis on works. They seem to believe that all you have to do is believe in God and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. That’s it. You don’t have to *do* anything. You just have to believe. No good works are required.

But that is not the message that I find in the Bible. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, found at Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus says that those who will have eternal life are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to strangers, clothe the naked, look after the sick, and visit those in prison. The righteous will enjoy eternal life because of *what they do*, not because of what they believe. And what they should do is serve others.

New Testament Bible verses about judgment day echo this idea. At Matthew 16:27 we read: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person *according to what they have done*.” In Mark 10:17-21, the rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recited six of the Ten Commandments. The rich young man said he had kept those commandments since he was a boy. Jesus said all he had to do then was to sell everything and give to the poor, and he would have treasure in heaven. Then he should follow Jesus. Jesus did not tell the rich young man what to believe, he told him what to *do*.

At John 5:27-29, Jesus said:

And he [the Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out— those *who have done what is good* will rise to live, and those *who have done what is evil* will rise to be condemned.”

Then there is Revelation 20:12-13, which says: “The dead were judged according to *what they had done* as recorded in the books... each person was judged according to *what they had done*.” Again and again, the emphasis is on what we do, not what we believe.

I think it is clear that faith and works are both important. We have to have faith, and we have to have works. And they should be connected. Our faith should flow into our deeds. Our good works should give life to our faith.

Now here comes the most difficult part—beliefs. Our faith and our beliefs are related but they are not the same thing. Our faith is trust and confidence in God. Our faith makes it possible to have a relationship with God. Our beliefs are different. Our beliefs are our *descriptions* of God. Our beliefs are our attempt to describe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For two thousand years, Christians have been trying to describe God. This effort is completely natural and understandable. It is also natural and understandable that people have written down their descriptions, which have often become specific creeds or statements of faith. There is for example the Apostles Creed, created in the early years of Christianity, and the Nicene Creed, dating back to 325 A.D.

The beliefs of millions of Christians have changed over the centuries. It has been a long journey, a journey of prayer, discernment, and discussion which is not over. Descriptions of God have changed and continue to change.

Remember, during the first century after Jesus was resurrected, the New Testament as we know it today did not exist yet. The letters of Paul were written about 20 or 30 years after the resurrection, followed by the Gospels. The last of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John, was probably written 60 to 80 years after the resurrection.

Even after the letters and books of the New Testament were written, it was centuries before they came together. The 27 books in our New Testament gradually became accepted after individuals, churches, and councils prayed, studied, discussed, and discerned which books were inspired by God and were authoritative for the Christian community. As one example, it is said that in 367 A.D. Athanasius, a respected church father, provided his list of books that he thought should be included in the New Testament. Gradually, other churches accepted the list because they agreed that the books were inspired by God.

It should not be surprising that in the first few centuries after the resurrection of Christ, Christians did not agree on a lot of things. For example, they did not agree on the divinity of Jesus. He was divine, yes, but *how* divine, and *when* did he become divine? He was the Son of God, but did he become the Son of God when he was born, or when he was baptized by John, or when he gave his life on the cross? And was he just the Son of God, or was he in fact *God*?

There was also a major disagreement over the origin of the Holy Spirit. It is said that one reason for the split between the church in Rome and the Eastern church in Constantinople was their disagreement over whether the Holy Spirit comes from the Father, or from the Father *and* the Son. Another view was that the Holy Spirit comes from the Father *through* the Son. Then there was a difference over the celibacy of the clergy, and the autonomy of the church from the government. In the eleventh century, the Pope sent an ambassador to

Constantinople who basically excommunicated the entire Eastern church over their different beliefs.

Baptism is another example of differences in beliefs. There are Christians who believe in infant baptism, and Christians who don't— they believe you must be baptized as an adult. Then there are those who focus on baptism in the Holy Spirit, which refers to the moment in which the Holy Spirit first begins to operate in the life of a believer.

And so, for two thousand years, Christians have been on a journey, seeking to understand God and the Bible. That journey has resulted in differences in beliefs. Those differences have not only divided Christians, they have also caused the persecution and even deaths of many Christians. Christians have *killed* other Christians over their doctrinal differences.

Unfortunately, these doctrinal differences seem to have grown over the centuries. About 15 years ago, I was writing a Christian book, and I was hopeful that I could write a book that would not offend different Protestant denominations. So I bought a book to learn more about Protestant denominations, and was shocked to see that there were more than 200 denominations described in the book. How could there be so many?

But I was in for a much bigger shock. The year 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It was a time for scholars and researchers to ponder what has happened since the Protestant Reformation started in 1517. One thing that has happened is that the number of Protestant denominations has grown dramatically. One researcher estimated that there are now 38,000 Protestant denominations in the world. Another researcher said no, that's not right. There are 45,000 Protestant denominations in the world.

One imagines that there are a lot of factors that have led to so many denominations. Those factors can include history, geography, politics, culture, and the personalities of church leaders. But I am sure that doctrinal differences play a major role. I assume that many denominations came into being because people had new or different interpretations of the Bible that led to different beliefs.

We are called to be the body of Christ. We read in John 13 that during the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

In John 17 we read that Jesus prayed that his disciples may all be one, so that the world will believe that God sent him.

Doctrinal differences have made it difficult for members of the body of Christ to love one another and be one body. Ideally, we can come together by uniting around our essential beliefs, while accepting the fact that others will have different beliefs that are outside of those essential beliefs.

This approach is important to us at Pacific Rim Christian University, where I work. Pacific Rim Christian University is an accredited, local, Christian university. Like a Bible college, we offer Associate's degrees and Bachelor's degrees, and like a seminary, we offer Master's degrees, including the Master of Divinity, which is accepted by many denominations as the professional degree for the pastorate.

Last semester we had 157 students from 57 different churches. We come together around a common statement of faith. Beyond that statement of faith, we expect that there will be diverse views. We value being a Christian learning community that is inclusive and diverse, yet strong in our common faith. I do not claim that it is easy, but it is possible to have diverse beliefs and still be the body of Christ.

Personally, I think the United Church of Christ treats this issue very well. The UCC has a wonderful Statement of Faith. You have copies in your bulletins. Please take them out... Let's read it out loud together:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him.

Amen.

The UCC adds this comment:

We believe the UCC is called to be a united and uniting church. "That they may all be one." (John 17:21) "In essentials—unity, in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity." These UCC mottos survive because they touch core values deep within us. The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love. UCC pastors and teachers are known for their commitment to excellence in theological preparation, interpretation of the scripture and justice advocacy. Even so, love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets.

There is great wisdom in this. The beliefs of the UCC include the belief that the church can be a uniting force in the world. We badly need this, starting within each church, and expanding out to the rest of the Christian world. The overarching creed is love.

So we must have faith, and we must have works. When it comes to beliefs, we must have humility, respect, patience, and a lot of love. We can cherish our beliefs, without attacking those who believe differently. And we can focus on faith and works, because those are things that all Christians should have in common. Let's help each other to build our relationship with God and do all that we can to

love and serve others. If we do that, we can help the Kingdom of God to break into our world. If we do that, we can be together with Jesus, now and for all eternity.

May God bless us all. Amen.