

## Spiritual Disciplines

1Corinthians 9:24-10:45

Septuagesima, January 28, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Faith is faith.

Faith is the trust in God that He will keep His promises.

Faith is more than simply acknowledging that God exists. When people ask other people whether or not they believe in God what they typically are asking is whether or not the person in question believes that God exists. That is why so many of you are dismayed when I tell you that I don't believe in God. You think that I am saying that I don't believe that God exists. While faith obviously believes that God exists, faith is more than simply believing that God exists. The demons in hell believe that God exists, but they don't have faith.

On that subject faith is more than simply assenting to a list of facts from the Bible. Faith is more than simply acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God. Again during our Lord's ministry even the demons acknowledged that He is the Son of God. They could hardly deny it. The demons even acknowledged that Jesus had the authority to judge them. In so acknowledging the demons demonstrate that they have more faith than most humans do, but since faith is more than acknowledging a list of facts from the Bible, in spite of the fact that the demons acknowledge Jesus' sonship from the Father and His authority to judge, they still don't have faith.

That means that faith is more than simply acknowledging that Jesus died on the cross. It is more than acknowledging that He rose from the dead. As remarkable as it is that a person believes that a dead man returned to life, that is not sufficient for faith. Faith is more than simply acknowledging the truth of the facts that the Bible presents even as remarkable as those facts are.

Faith, true and genuine faith, saving faith, not only believes that Jesus did those things, but that Jesus did them for you. If you have faith, Jesus didn't just die on the cross, Jesus died for you. If you have faith, Jesus didn't just rise from the dead. He rose from the dead to save you.

Faith relies on these saving actions of Jesus for its salvation. Faith looks forward to the return of Jesus because faith knows that Jesus will return to give salvation to those who are waiting for Him. Since faith believes that Jesus has saved the person who has faith, faith eagerly looks forward to the day of Jesus' return and to the salvation that He has promised. Faith believes the promise. Faith believes everything that Jesus says. Faith does not doubt it at all.

So faith is a reliance of the human being on the promises and acts of mercy of almighty God shown chiefly through His Son, Jesus Christ. While faith affects and engages the intellect, it is not primarily an intellectual exercise. Infants rely on their mothers. Therefore infants have faith in their mothers. Nevertheless an infant cannot explain or describe everything about his mother. In the same way you and I and an infant cannot explain and describe everything about God, but if we have faith in Him that means that we rely on Him. We rely on Him for everything. We believe Him when He tells us that we are forgiven. We believe Him when He tells us that because of Jesus we are saved.

That is faith.

If we are saved by faith, we are not saved by our achievements. The Scriptures usually call such achievements works of the law. Since the men who wrote the Scriptures had faith, they don't consider anything an achievement unless it is a work of the law. That is to say that an action on our part isn't really good unless God says it is good. Something might be an achievement in our view and not be an achievement in God's view.

But even if something is an achievement in God's view we are not saved by that achievement. We are saved by faith. Faith is therefore not an achievement of ours. It is something that God has worked in our hearts by His Word.

God wants it this way because He is God. If we could achieve enough good works to earn salvation then we would be our own saviors. If we are our own saviors, then we are our own gods and we don't need God. Therefore when God saves us, He saves us in such a way that we are not saved by our achievements. We are saved by His achievements culminating in the crucified Lord and the empty tomb. In this way God is God and we become His people. In being His people we find ourselves to be truly human. In other words we find ourselves to be the way that He created us in the beginning, dependent on Him. And what is dependence on Him? It is faith.

Therefore any other attitude toward God except faith tries to make us God and Him subservient to us as we try to use Him as a means to justify ourselves. Therefore anything that is not faith is idolatry. This is why the Scripture says that everything that does not proceed from faith is sin.

Now here is the curious thing about faith. We are saved by it and not by works. It is therefore not a work. But faith is a reliance on God for everything, forgiveness, salvation, everything.

Now, the enemy of your souls does not want to have faith. Satan, the ancient serpent, the devil, the accuser of our brothers, whatever you want to call him, does not want you to believe in God. He never has. He does not want you to rely on God. He does not want you to be dependent on God. He does not want you to have faith. The enemy of your souls wants you to be your own god. He wants you to decide what is right and what is wrong for yourself and not simply receive all good things from God. He wants you to reach out your hand and engage in all kinds of activities whereby you determine that you are your own God. He has done this since the beginning. And because we are complicit with him we desire to be our own gods and once we are our own gods we no longer have faith. We are dependent upon ourselves. We are relying on ourselves. We may believe that God exists, but unless we have true faith, we are no better off than the demons.

How does the enemy try to lure you away from faith? He lies to you. He tells you all kinds of lies. He tells you every lie that he can think of to tell you. He is hoping that you will believe at least one of them. It is better for him and worse for you if you believe more than one of his lies. But even believing one lie gives him sufficient material to work with. He will use the one lie of his that you believe in order to call into question everything else that God has told you. He will question everything from whether or not the law of God is fair and just to whether or not God Himself is fair and just. And if you believe that God and His law are just the enemy of your soul will call into question whether or not God is actually merciful. The enemy of your soul will call into question whether or not dead men rise from the dead in order to question whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. And even if you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, the enemy of your soul will question whether or not Jesus rose from the dead for you.

My suspicion is that is where he attacks most of us. We have a blessed institution here at Immanuel. We have an institution that supports faith in everything from the death and resurrection of Jesus to His miracles and the miracles of the prophets to a six day creation. While the enemy of your soul will still lie about those things in order to get you to doubt them, his more crafty attack is simply to let you believe that all of those things took place, but that they did not take place for you. This is why so many of you speak in way that indicates that you doubt your salvation.

Many of you will say things like, "I hope I make it." "I hope my sins are forgiven." "I hope God is pleased with me." The enemy of your soul has lied to you and told you that saying those things is appropriate because it shows humility. The problem is that those statements only show humility if you

believe that you are saved by your works and not by Jesus! When a person relies on their good works to be saved it becomes arrogant on that person's part to say, "I know I'm going to make it." "I know I'm going to heaven." "I know that God accepts me." When you believe that you are justified by your good works it is arrogant to say those things because it implies that you have done enough to make it. Therefore to say you are not sure whether or not you will make it and to say that under the notion that it is a humble thing to say that you are not sure whether or not you will make it simply reveals that you are in fact not relying on Jesus for salvation, but rather relying on your good works for salvation. And if you are relying on your good works for salvation, then you don't have faith.

Faith therefore is the opposite of doubt. Faith knows that its sins are forgiven because faith knows what great lengths the Son of God went through in order to get sins forgiven. Faith relies on the means that Jesus Himself instituted in order to give that forgiveness to faith. Faith relies on Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar as divinely appointed means of bestowing forgiveness upon faith. Faith does not come back from the Communion rail and say to itself, "Well, I hope my sins are forgiven." To do so is blasphemous because it denies Christ and everything that Christ has done for you. It calls Christ a liar when He says to drink this for the forgiveness of sins. It denies His death on your behalf. It denies His resurrection on your behalf. So even though the risen Lord bids peace be with you indicating that His death and His resurrection are in fact for you, you deny those truths when you say, "I hope my sins are forgiven." It is blasphemous. It is idolatrous. But the enemy of your souls has lied to you and told you that it is humble. It is only humble if you believe in your good works and if you believe in your good works, then you don't have faith.

And that is just one kind of temptation. There are numerous lies that he is telling you. He has institutions that work on his behalf in order to feed you lies in a way that sound authoritative. He lies to you in the public schools. He lies to you on the television set. He lies to you on the internet. He lies to you in the newspaper. He lies to you in books. He lies to you in movies. He lies to you in the deceitfulness of your own heart. And each lie is designed to convince you to rely on yourself and not on Jesus Christ! Each lie is designed to get you to treat yourself as if you are God and He is not! In short he does not want you to believe in God. He wants you damned.

Now, if we have faith, then we believe all of this because God has revealed it to us in His word. What are we to do, if anything, about this?

Well, that depends on where faith comes from. Faith comes from the report that God gives. The report that God gives comes through the Word of Christ. Therefore the Word of Christ grants faith. It bestows repentance and faith. It gives you the new birth in the Holy Spirit. It does not do it by works, but by God's almighty power.

Well, if faith comes from the Word of Christ, then we will be better prepared to meet the lies of the enemy of our souls, if we imbibe the Word of Christ as much as we can. And here is where spiritual disciplines come in. The irony is that it is better to do something in order to maintain the faith that you don't do anything to be saved, than it is to do nothing and let the enemy of your soul lie to you and tell you that you need to do something to be saved.

There are pastors who do not require their junior catechumens to do memory work. One of the bitterest arguments that I ever encountered at seminary in class was when the professor asked us whether or not we were going to require memory work of the catechumens in our congregations. It was a big fight. I will tell you about sometime. And here is the bitter irony. Studies have been done on this subject within Lutheran congregations. And it turns out that the pastors who do not require memory work are pastors who are afraid that if they require memory work that by that practice they will teach their

catechumens that they are justified by their achievements in this case successful recitations of memory work. The irony is that when the catechumens of such pastors were questioned about their faith consistently they gave the answer that they thought that they were saved by doing good works. And oddly enough the catechumens who had a pastor who had them go through the spiritual discipline of doing memory work consistently for the most part answered that they were saved because of what Jesus had done for them in His death and resurrection. They knew that they were sinners and were not saved by their works. They knew this and believed it because the pastor had taken the time to have them memorize it. And if pastor went through the agony and trouble of having them memorize it, the catechumens got the notion into their heads that this must be important. Pastors who did not require this taught their catechumens that it was unimportant.

God has written the natural law on our hearts. Without the Word of Christ to bring us the Gospel of His forgiveness and salvation in Christ Jesus all we have left is the law on our hearts. The enemy of your soul will use that very law of God to convince you that you have to rely on yourself to be good enough to be saved. Once he tells that lie he has told you to be your own savior. And when you are your own savior you are your own God.

So spiritual disciplines are useful and good. Spiritual disciplines in the word of God will grant you salvation.

Lent is coming up. I remember a pastor of a congregation who does not practice or observe Lent asking a member of our congregation whether or not we believed that we were saved by observing Lent. Fortunately the member of Immanuel that he asked looked at him like he did not understand what he was talking about. The pastor was concerned that if Lutherans observe Lent the Lutherans will become convinced that they are doing something extra special for God over against those Christians who do not observe Lent. And he thought that if we thought that we were doing something extra special for God by observing Lent, then we must believe that we are saved by our achievements, doing extra special things for God. In other words, he assumed that we were works righteous people here at Immanuel. What he did not realize was that at Immanuel we have the spiritual discipline of observing readings and meditations which focus on the death of Jesus Christ during Lent. What is the death of Jesus Christ about except saving us from our sins? Therefore, not only does Lent focus our attention on Jesus and His saving action on our behalf, it also focuses us on the sins that made His saving actions necessary. That means that there will be Lutherans who are saved because they observed Lent. Lenten discipline convinced them that they could not save themselves, but nevertheless told them they were saved by Jesus Christ. And therefore Jesus Christ was their God and they did not try to be their own god. They had faith. The Word of Christ gave them faith.

So if you are not reading the Bible at all during the week, start doing it, so that you may recognize the enemy of your souls when he tells you his lies. If you are reading a verse of the Bible on a flip calendar every day, while that is better than not reading anything at all, read more. Read a chapter a day. If you are reading a chapter a day, read more. It was odd to me. Christy and I had always read a chapter a day for our daily devotions until Nathan. Once he came along in order to put him to sleep as an infant, I used to sing to him. Well, singing for three hours straight while he fell asleep got old after a while. I remember on one occasion I sang, "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb" to him about seventeen times until Christy told me to stop! So I started reading the Bible to him. I found myself reading several chapters to him at a time. When I did this I realized that even though I was a pastor and a professional theologian there were more than one passage of the Scripture that I did not understand correctly and the enemy of my soul had used those misunderstanding to try to create doubt in my heart about God's mercy.

So I don't really care what spiritual disciplines you engage in to be more in the Word of Christ which gives faith, but whatever they are increase your game.

In the Epistle reading God offers you a carrot and a stick in order to increase your spiritual disciplines.

The stick is in the Old Testament. God redeemed Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God redeemed you by His death and resurrection out of slavery to sin and death. God brought Israel out into the freedom of the wilderness. God brought you out into the freedom of faith. God baptized them under Moses in the cloud and in the sea. That is to say that God used water to save them. God used the cloud which is made of water to save them from starvation in the wilderness by guiding them. God used the water of the Reed Sea to drown the Egyptian army who was pursuing them, while He miraculously allowed them to pass across the sea on dry land while He held the waters back with His wind. God used water to save you. It was your baptism which saved you. In the freedom of the wilderness God fed them with spiritual food. That is to say that He fed them with the food that He miraculously gave them to eat. That food was the manna. In the freedom of your faith God also gives you spiritual food to eat. That is to say that He miraculously provides you with food, His body, to eat. God also gave them spiritual drink to drink. That is to say that He miraculously provided them with water in the wilderness through the rock that followed them and, get this, that rock was Christ! That rock was the preincarnate Christ giving them water to drink and by so doing sustaining their life in the wilderness. In the same way Christ sustains you in the wilderness of this world in the freedom of your faith by giving you spiritual drink, His blood.

Now here is the stick. In spite of the fact that they had the same blessings that you have although under the forms and types of the Old Testament, many of them did not believe in God or that He would care for them in spite of His providence. God put them to death in the wilderness. And God will put you to death in hell, if you lose your faith in Him and no longer believe in Him. That is to say, no longer rely on depend on Him, but rather think that you must do it yourself.

In the epistle reading God also offers you a carrot.

In a race the runners exercise self-control. They refrain from certain activities. They refrain from certain foods. They engage in disciplines designed to enhance muscle strength so that they win the prize. The prize that they win is perishable. In ancient times it was a simple crown of laurel leaves which dried up before the day was over.

The Olympics are next month. They are no different. If you listen to the Olympic games on TV, listen to the personal disciplines of the athletes. Some of them give up certain foods or activities. Some of them give up years of their life with their families in order to live closer to their trainers and get the necessary training to win. The exercise routines of these athletes are remarkable and unthinkable. And they do all of this to get a prize that is corruptible. I know the Olympics give out medals, but gold is corruptible and subject to decay just like laurel leaves are.

Now, your spiritual disciplines are designed to enhance and strengthen your faith which is more precious than gold. They are designed to keep you in the Word of Christ and away from the lies of the enemy of your souls. The result is a faith which relies on God in Christ Jesus and not on itself or its good deeds. The prize is everlasting life. It does not fade. It is not corruptible.

Now which disciplines are more important? Which prize is better?

I leave it to you and your faith and your life to answer such questions.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.