

FAITH'S WAY OF APPROACH

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TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

SERMON TEXT: ROM. 10:17

**"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."-- Romans
10:17**

According to the Christian religion, faith is the great essential thing. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Whatever we may do or may be, we cannot be acceptable with the Most High unless we believe in Him. Even prayer can only be a mockery if it be not the prayer of faith. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" <Heb 11:6>, or else he does not really pray. The Lord Jesus Christ has died to save men; but it is certain that no man will be saved without faith. Even the blood of Jesus Christ does not save any except those who believe in it. "God so loved the world" is a very wide expression, but we must make it wider than Scripture makes it, for remember how the verse goes on, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" <Jn 3:16>. Without faith Christ is not ours. His blood cannot cleanse us; his life cannot quicken us. We must have faith to get at the blessings of salvation.

Suppose we could be brought into touch with Christ without faith for a while, yet if we had not continuous faith, we should not have a continued connection with the Saviour, and consequently should not abide in life eternal; for it is written, "The just shall live by faith." They not only begin to live by faith, but continue to live in the same manner. In our holy religion, everything is by faith,-- faith for life, and faith for death. Even the first tears of repentance must be salted with faith, and the last song on earth shall be full of faith. Ye must have faith, or ye must perish. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned" <Mk 16:16>, is the declaration of Jesus Christ the Saviour himself.

I. SO FIRST, LET US DISCOVER WHAT FAITH IS

We have seen that it is essential; it is very important to understand its nature. Well, faith with regard to God is the same as faith with regard to anything else. It is the same act of the mind, though it differs as to its object. When I believe in God, it is the same kind of mental act as when I believe in my friend. I believe with the same mind.

'Tis true that all saving faith is the work of the Holy Ghost in us; but it always recollected that we ourselves believe, and that the Holy Ghost does not believe for us. What has the Holy Ghost to believe about? It is not written that he is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. No, but we are to believe in him. He leads us to faith, but the faith is our own act and deed; and if there could be supposed to be a faith which was not our own act and deed, it could not possibly be the faith which saves the soul. If I understand aright the faith which saves, it is just this. God has revealed such-and-such truth, I believe it to be true, and I so believe it to be true that I act upon it. God has said that He has laid sin upon Christ; I believe He has done so. He tells me that, if I trust Christ, I may be assured that my sin was laid upon Christ. I trust Christ, that is, I rely upon him, and the reliance which springs out of belief is the essence of faith.

When a man believes a bank to be safe, he will put his money into it if he has need to do so; when a man believes in the honesty of another, the practical issue of it is he takes his word and trusts him. I believe in the truthfulness of God, in the truthfulness of certain narratives given by the four evangelists; I believe that Christ was born at Bethlehem, that he was the Son of God, and that he lived and died as the Saviour of men; I believe that his sufferings were expiatory, that he suffered in the stead of sinners to make recompence to the justice of God for our sins; and, believing that, I trust my soul upon his sacrifice. I rest on it, and that faith saves me.

Now, mark, if I do really rest in Christ, I shall do what Christ bids me. Faith must lead to obedience. He bids me forsake sin, and I shall do it by his help. He bids me follow him and I shall do it if I really believe in him. A doctor says, "Now, trust me, my man, and I will cure you." Very good; I trust him. He sends me medicine, and I take it. But suppose I do not take the medicine; well, then, I never trusted him; my neglect proves that I cannot have done so.

The only trust that saves the soul is that practical which obeys Jesus Christ. Faith that does not obey is dead faith,-- nominal faith. It is the outside of faith, the husk of faith, but it has not the vital corn of faith in it. Sinner, if thou wilt be saved, thou must give thyself up to Jesus Christ to be his servant, and to do all that he bids thee. Thou must rely alone upon him; trust not in fiction, but in reality, not by profession merely, but with thy whole heart; and thou must continue to lean, rest, and lie upon him, trusting alone in him. This is what saving faith is.

Now, there are some who say they wish they could get this faith; they declare that they would do anything to get it. They earnestly long to Believe, but somehow they cannot get a grip of faith, cannot quite make out what it is; or if they know what it is, they are still puzzled, they cannot exercise it.

Albeit faith is the gift of God, it is always the act of man; while faith is a privilege, it is always a natural duty; men are bidden to believe in Jesus, and are sinful if they do not believe in Jesus. Where faith does exist, it is the gift of God; but where it does not exist, it is because men will not believe in him, but shut their eyes to his light. If they would but see it, that light would convince them.

II. LET US THEREFORE CLEAR AWAY SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH REFERENCE TO FAITH.

You want faith, you say. You are not a sceptic; you accept the Word of God. You are not one of those who are unsound about the Deity of Christ, you receive that. Still, you cannot, you say, get at faith in Jesus Christ. Listen, then, to these observations.

First, recollect that it will be your wisdom not to think so much about faith as about the object of faith. If I want to Believe a thing that is in the newspaper, it is no use my sitting down, and reading it over, and saying, "I should like to believe it, and I will try to believe it." My proper way is to begin to look into the matter,-- not rate my faith, but into the matter itself; and when I have looked into the matter itself, I shall see whether it is reasonable,-- whether it looks true, and by-and-by, perceiving the truthfulness of it, faith will come to me as a matter of course.

You are to believe in Jesus. Now, forget the believing, and think only of Jesus. If I wanted to love a person, it would be useless for me to sit in my chamber, and say, "I shall try to love such-and-such a person." You cannot pump love up out of your heart in that way. But suppose that person is exceedingly beautiful, has a delightful character, and has lived a charming life; well, I gaze upon that person's face; I hear the story of his life; and I feel that, what I could not make myself do, I do without attempting to make myself do it. Love comes of itself. "If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned" <Song 8:7>. So it with faith. Speaking naturally, it comes of itself, through the work of the Spirit of God, from the force of the evidence which is presented to the mind. "Faith cometh by hearing." Look, then, more at what is to be believed than at the mere act of believing.

And, next, be solemnly persuaded that what you want is faith, and that you must have it. Do not, therefore, begin confounding faith with something else. Some of you want an impression; you want a revelation; you want a feeling; you want a sensation. Now, that is not faith; it has nothing to do with faith. It is feeling, it is seeing, but it is not believing. What you really need is to believe in God, and if you do that, you shall be saved; but instead of that, you begin to cry, "Oh, that I felt as Mr. Bunyan felt on such an occasion!" That is not the matter in hand, and you are but turning aside from the point you should aim at when you look to those things instead of faith. All other good things will follow faith; but for you who are unsaved, the first, the only matter is faith in Jesus Christ.

Many persons are anxious to be saved, which is a good thing; but they have mapped out the way in which they want God to save them, which is a bad thing. They have read the biographies of eminent Christians, and they have discovered that some of them, before they found Christ, were sorely tried by horrible thoughts, doubts and fears, temptations to blaspheme, and so on. Possibly, they have read Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, and have noted that he went through a very terrible season of distress before he found peace with God. Perhaps some of you, my dear friends, have fallen into the idea that, if ever you are to be saved, you must feel just as John Bunyan did; and although you have been told, over and over again, that simple

faith in Jesus Christ will save you, and save you just as you are, yet you still think it cannot be so, but that you must have a deep law work, and most dreadful feelings before you can come to the Saviour.

I would exhort you earnestly to pray for help in this matter of believing. Ask the Lord to give you faith, but I ask you to remember that prayer without faith will not save you, and that the gospel is not "He that prays shall be save," but "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" <Jn 3:36>. Some have unbelievably made a kind of saviour of their prayers and tears; but that will not do. Away with your prayers if they stand in the room of Christ! It is not what you ask for, or feel, or do; it is what Christ suffered on the cross that is to save you; and the way you are to appropriate the merit of Christ is by faith; so keep to that. Know what it is you want, and press forward to get that.

Now we come more closely still to the text. Faith is the thing we want. We shall get it according to God's order, and God's order is this: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" <Rom 10:17>. Faith does not come by sacraments. Nobody ever got faith through a sacrament. It does not say, "Faith comes by seeing." Those processions are very pretty, very pretty indeed; and very fine those banners; and sweet the smoke of that incense but faith does not come that way. Eyegate is closed, and through Eargate eternal life comes into soul of man. "Faith cometh by hearing."

The religion of Jesus Christ is not a religion of performances. It has its ordinances which belong to believers, but it never attempts to change the moral nature by mechanical acts. Eating and drinking and washing cannot possibly be the means by which men are reconciled to God and taught to love the Redeemer. There is a moral means wanted,-- a spiritual means, and the moral and spiritual means are as simple as possible: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" <Rom 10:17>.

The text suggests two things, then, as to faith's way of approach. If I want to get faith I must hear, but I must mind what I hear; and I must mind how I hear.

III. LET US REMEMBER, THAT, FAITH COMES THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD.

Soul, wouldst thou have faith! Then mind what it is thou dost hear, for the hearing must be "by the Word of God." Faith comes by hearing, but not by hearing anything and everything. The hearing is "by the Word of God;" and only as the preaching is according to the Word of God will bless it. God never blessed a falsehood to the creation of a newborn spirit. The truth has vitality in it; only the Word of God is the living seed in the soul.

"Well," say you, "how am I to hear the Word of God, then?" I reply, first, hear the Word of God as you have it in the Bible. Reading is tantamount to hearing. Be sure then, if thou wouldst find faith, to study much this priceless, matchless Book. Study it all; but if thou wouldst find Christ, dwell most on those four inestimably precious Books which tell us most about him. Read the story of his life and his death as given by the four evangelists; and if thou wouldst have a comment upon them, read the Epistles, and study them.

Remember, the point about the Word of God is this,-- that God has spoken to men through this Book. Men wrote it, but they wrote as they were inspired and moved by the Holy Ghost. Especially about the Lord Jesus Christ has God spoken to us by chosen witnesses. There were first the apostles who have written a considerable part of the New Testament. These men saw Christ, John says, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory" <Jn 1:14>. There were many of them, and they saw the miracles of Christ, so that they were sure he was divine. They saw his holy, guileless life; they saw him in his death; and what is best of all, and most to be remembered, is that they saw him risen again, they watched him at intervals during forty days they saw him till a cloud received him out of their sight.

They were simple-minded men who could not have invented the story; they were mostly unlettered men; and they and hundreds others so believed it that they died for preaching what they believed. They gained nothing by the statement except scorn and shame. If there is a fact in human history which is verified beyond a doubt, it is the death and resurrection of the Son of God.

Does not that help you to believe? "Ah!" say you, "I do believe these facts." Well, if you do believe them in very deed and truth, what follows from your belief? Why, that you must hate God in your heart, or else you would be saved, because this glorious One of whom they speak came here to save men, and will save all that trust him. You perceive him to be a divine person; can you not trust him? If not, it must be because you have some hatred to him, and prefer to be damned rather than owe your salvation to the free grace of God.

Let it not be so! But rather, I pray you, hear his Word by attentively reading it, until at last, as you read it, the glory of the inspired truth, which shines in the page, shall flame into your soul, and you shall say, "I do believe it; how could I have rejected it? It speaks for itself; the Deity is in the Word."

Next to that, however, hear the preachers of God's Word; for, though they are not inspired, yet they can do something for you. We can bear witness to what we have known and felt of the work of Jesus Christ in men's hearts, and this will supplement the witness of the inspired men, and may help you to believe. As one has well said, "If you question a convert, you will generally find that he owes his conversion to a text of Scripture." It is God's Word, not man's comment on God's Word, that generally saves souls. If you long to be saved, go, therefore, to those that keep to the gospel, that keep to the real gospel, and have nothing else to say. That is what you want.

Seek also to hear the preacher who preaches experimentally, one who can tell you that he knows he is a sinner, but that he has believed in Jesus, and is saved, and knows he is saved. For your healing, you want to have, not a surgeon who has never seen a case like yours before, but one who knows about it; and if he has gone through a similar experience himself, then he is the man for you. If a man has not had anything done for his soul, he cannot tell you of anything that has been done. If he has never seen himself to be a sinner, and has never passed from death unto life, if he has never known the bitter pangs of soul trouble, and has never looked to the precious Saviour on the cross, and leaped to find himself set free, why, what is the good of him as a preacher? Let him go and bake bread, or break stones on the road; but what has he to

do with preaching a gospel of which he knows nothing? Therefore I say again to thee, if thou wouldst get faith, hear that gospel that speaks to thy soul, because he who preaches it speaks from his soul about something that he knows for himself.

And if thou hast thy choice, hear one who speaks earnestly, for to hear a cold preacher is the surest way of getting cold thyself. He that trifles with his ministry will make men trifle with their souls. If I am speaking to any who preach the gospel, I would say that, if we do not preach earnestly, people will conclude at once that there is nothing in what we preach, and their blood will lie at our door. We have a weighty theme, and we must speak with all our heart and soul.

To thee, sinner, I would also say, hear the preacher who speaks pointedly. Do not feel vexed with one who exposes your faults. What do you go to a place of worship for but to have your heart laid bare? A doctor, who never makes an examination, of his patient, or who, knowing that there is an evil somewhere, is too delicate to allude to it, is a disgrace to his profession. The man who desires to heal men will be plain and honest with them, and will not at all attempt to palliate an evil thing.

Take heed what ye hear, for if ye hear the Word of God preached in the power of the Spirit of God, then faith come by such hearing.

IV. LET US BE ASSURED THAT FAITH WILL COME BY HEARING.

If we would get faith, we must take care how we hear as well as what we hear. The hearing is itself almost as important as the preaching. Faith does not come by every sort of hearing. There have been persons who have heard the gospel for many years, but they have really heard nothing, for it has gone in at one ear, and out at the other. Faith does not come by such hearing.

Brethren, if we really seek faith, we ought to hear the gospel aiming at the sense of it first. It is what a preacher says, not how he says it, that is the vital thing. I am certain, however, that nine-tenths of our hearers are more taken up with how we say it than with what we say. Of course, we all hear a thing the better if it is put well; but woe to the man who cares only about delicacy of diction, and lets his hearers go down to hell! Woe unto him in the great day of account! If, however, the preacher preaches Christ, though he does not preach him as you would like to hear him preached, but somewhat uncouthly, yet listen to him, whoever he may be, for it is the truth that he declares. Do not regard his manner so much as his matter, and pray that it may be blessed.

You who have not believed, hear every sermon with the desire to get faith through the sermon. I believe that our hearers generally get what they came for. If a man goes fishing, he will generally catch fish according to his bait. Some come expecting to get something to find fault with. Well, they are sure to find it. But when a man comes with this design, "I want to find Jesus; I want to get good for my soul; I want to be saved," then, if the preacher is what he should be, the man cannot go away

disappointed. If the minister does not preach at all, but only reads part of a chapter, there will be a blessing; if it be only a hymn that is sung, the seeking soul will lay hold of Christ in a hymn, especially if it be such a hymn as "Just as I am, without one plea" or "Rock of ages, cleft for me," or "Jesu, Lover of my soul." If you want faith, you need not be long wanting it if you really come anxiously desiring to obtain it.

Dear friends, the kind of hearing that brings faith is attentive hearing. I have heard of a child who used always to lean forward to catch every word the preacher said; and his mother asked him why he did so. He replied, "Because, mother, I heard the preacher say that, if there was anything in the sermon by which God meant to bless us, the devil would try to draw our attention some other way when it was being said, and I was so afraid that some good thing that would have blessed me might escape me if I was inattentive." It is a great joy to preach to a house full of people like that, people who are praying as the preacher speaks, "Oh, for a blessing, Lord! Oh, that the Word might come with power to my soul!"

Then take care to hear retentively. Lay hold upon the Word. Keep it, treasure it. Perhaps you say, "I have a bad memory." Well, the very best thing to do when you have a bad memory is to do as the man did who never could recollect what he owed so he took care always to pay as he went. If you cannot recollect, go and do at once what you are bidden to do, and then you will not forget it. "Be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only." If you get the substance never mind the words. If you have a bad habit, and it is preached against, never mind the sermon; go and break off the evil habit. If you have been neglectful of prayer, never mind the sermon; pray more. And if Jesus Christ is lifted up before you, and you cannot recollect what the preacher says, never mind, look to Jesus. There is Christ upon the cross, and if you look to him at this moment, you shall live for ever. What memory is needed if you look to him now? Now, poor sinner, turn thine eye, and thou shalt have heard the gospel in a most retentive manner indeed.

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One;
There is life at this moment for thee;
Then look, sinner,-- look unto him, and be saved,
Unto him who was nail'd to the tree."

Lastly, hear the gospel with deep reverence and earnest prayer. It is no small matter that God should deal with thy soul at all, but that He should condescend to speak to thee on terms of love is a wonderful thing. That his own Son should bleed and die for sinners, is not this a miracle of mercy? With such great themes under discussion in the pulpit thou oughtest to be greatly reverent during the hearing of the Word. Thou shouldst be, indeed, like the earth in the dry weather, that opens wide its mouth, chapped and parched as it is, to suck in every drop of rain that falls. If thou art sitting under the sound of the gospel thus, parched and dry, but opening thy soul to receive it, and saying, "Drop from above, O sacred dew; come out of heaven, O showers of grace, and fall on me," it will not be long that thou wilt so wait.

Your chief business is to believe, and my business is to ask you, in the name of the eternal God, whether you will believe Him or whether you will make Him a liar. One

of the two it must be; he that makes God a liar involves himself in awful guilt, but he that believes in Him has glorified Him. God accepts the act of believing in Him as one of the noblest acts of man, so great an act that He sees His own Spirit's work in it wherever He perceives it. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" <Acts 16:31>. Believe on him now. Our witness is that He does save; He saves from the guilt of sin; He saves from the dread and wrath of hell; He saves from the anger of God; He saves from despair; He saves at once; He saves all who come to Him. Come you to Him.

Now we are going our several ways; what report am I to carry back to my Master, whose message I have been trying to deliver?

"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by,
To you is it nothing that Jesus should die?"

Young man yonder, is it nothing to you that Jesus should die? I ask your heart, young woman, for my dear Lord and Master. And you, old friend, your life is drawing to its close; it would have been better if you had given Christ the morning of your days, yet he will accept you even now if you will come unto him. May he give you the grace to rest upon him now, to trust him this very hour! Then, where he is there shall you be also, through the efficacy of his great atoning sacrifice. God grant it, for Jesus' sake! Amen.
(from Spurgeon's Encyclopedia of Sermons)