

John 4:43-54

Improving Your Faith

And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way – v. 50.

We know from the narrative that Jesus, by this time in His ministry, had already performed many miracles. And a number of these miracles had been performed in Jerusalem. Because of these miracles verse 45 tells us *Then when he was come into Galilee, the Galilaeans received him, having seen all the things that he did at Jerusalem at the feast: for they also went unto the feast.* Some of these miracles would have been unlike any others while some of them would have been quite similar to others.

For example, the miracle of healing this Nobleman's son bears a striking resemblance to his healing the Centurion's servant which is recorded for us in Mt. 8. In both cases the recipients of the miracles were very near to death. The Nobleman and the Centurion were both from Capernaum and both these men would have been ranking officials. It may be for that reason that some have thought that the two accounts are referring to the same miracle.

Upon closer examination, however, you can't help but notice some key differences. In the case of the Nobleman, he besought Christ to come to his house and heal his son. In the case of the Centurion, when word reached Him that Christ was coming to his house, he besought Him not to come but to speak the word only that his servant might be healed. In that case the Centurion was commended for the greatness of his faith. It was such a faith that Christ had not seen among the Israelites. In the case of the Nobleman, it appears that his faith did not begin with the same kind of greatness that characterized the Centurion's faith. So we find Christ saying to the Nobleman and to those around him *Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe* (v. 48).

Was Christ suggesting that this Nobleman's faith was no better than the kind of faith we read about back in 2:23-25? *Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.*

You may recall when we studied that passage that we noted the phenomenon of those who had the kind of faith that came short of true saving faith. They certainly believed what they saw, when they saw Christ perform miracles, but it's also apparent that they didn't really grasp the importance of who Christ really was. Some would go so far as to call Him a prophet, others, I suppose, wondered who He was. It's apparent that none of those being referenced in John 2 really grasped that He was the long promised Messiah.

Is this the kind of faith the Nobleman had? Christ's word to him might lead you to think so, when He rebukes him for needing signs and wonders to believe, but on the other hand, he had come all the way from Capernaum to seek out Christ. Capernaum, we're told by commentators would have been some 15 miles from Cana in Galilee, where the Nobleman

met up with Christ. It would seem that he had more than just a passing interest in Christ. We know, of course, that he had very good motivation for seeking Christ. His son lie at home sick and that sickness was of such a serious nature that the Nobleman's son was about to die. It's very likely that the Nobleman would have availed himself of the services of the best physicians in Capernaum but nothing they ministered to the Nobleman's son worked and so feeling the situation to be desperate and having heard that Jesus had come out of Judah and entered Galilee, we find this Nobleman willing to make the 15 mile journey in order to catch up with Christ to plead with Him that He would come and heal his son.

What becomes very apparent in the narrative, however, is that where ever this Nobleman's faith began, or however you want to classify it, whether it was weak and didn't even amount to a mustard-seed's worth of faith, or whether or not it didn't really amount to any more than those mentioned at the end of John 2 to whom Christ would not commit Himself because he knew their hearts – I say whatever the case may be with this Nobleman's faith initially, it's very plain in the narrative that Christ had the aim of taking his faith even higher and making it stronger – or in other words Christ's aim was to improve the Nobleman's faith.

And once you come to realize Christ's aim with the Nobleman in improving his faith then this portion of John 4 becomes very practical for you and for me. And I say it becomes practical because the Lord's aim and desire for this Nobleman is no different than His aim and desire for you and for me. Christ wants your faith to be stronger. He wants to take you higher, and deeper in your trust of Him – and that's what faith is, faith is trust.

I'm afraid that all too often we have this tendency to become too complacent with regard to the level of our faith. Listen to this definition of the word *complacent*. This comes from the American Heritage Dictionary where it defines *complacent* as: *Satisfied with the current situation and unconcerned with changing it, often to the point of smugness.*

Does that describe your attitude toward your faith this morning? Are you able to trace progress in your faith? Or do you like many accept being on a spiritual plateau and you really aren't all that concerned about improving your faith. I was having this conversation with a brother not long ago and in a sense, I suppose, I was confessing my own sin when I frankly acknowledged that it seems a man may wake up one day and 10 to 15 or perhaps 20 years has passed and such a man finds himself asking – *what kind of progress have I made? Has my faith increased? Has my confidence and trust in Christ grown stronger? Is my walk with Christ closer?* Or have I settled on a certain smugness that simply accepts the level of faith I have so that I become unconcerned about changing or improving it.

When Paul writes to the Romans and speaks of the righteousness of God *from faith to faith*, I can't help but think that he has in mind the strengthening or the improving of our faith. And whose faith here this morning is not in need of improvement? Whose faith this morning is in need of strengthening? This was Christ's aim with this Nobleman. You could say that Christ desired that the faith of this Nobleman would come to resemble more

the great faith of the Centurion. He didn't start out that way. But before he was done we would find him, like the Centurion going his way without the presence of Christ, having to take Christ at His word. And that's the trajectory that our faith needs to be on – the trajectory to becoming great faith. Isn't that something you would desire in your walk with Christ? Isn't that something you need? Don't you become just a little bit discontented with a level of faith that seems so slow to grow and become deeper and stronger and which can cause you to soar higher?

What did Christ do for this Nobleman that took him higher and not only healed his son but strengthened his faith? I believe I can make this message very simple and practical this morning by calling on you to consider a simple question based on Christ's dealing with this Nobleman. And the question is this:

How Can We Improve Our Faith?

Let's trace the progression in this portion of John 4 and draw from this passage the things that are necessary for improving our faith. Some of these things are very basic and become a matter of exercise. Faith is something that improves, you see, by being exercised. So improving our faith is my theme. And let's think first of all that if you would improve your faith:

I. You Must Act on What You've Heard

Look with me at v. 47 *When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son.* Do you see how he acted on what he heard? Spurgeon refers to this activity of the Nobleman as the spark of faith.

Now I don't think I'm reading into the passage when I suggest that the Nobleman had undoubtedly heard much more about Jesus than that he was simply headed out of Judea into Galilee. Why would that capture his attention if he hadn't first heard many other things about Christ? Spurgeon, who is so good at bringing his congregation to the scenes of the gospels describes the situation this way:

“There is a nobleman living at Capernaum; he hears a rumor that a celebrated prophet and preacher is continually going through the cities of Galilee and Judea, and is given to understand that this mighty preacher does not merely enthrall every hearer by his eloquence, but wins the hearts of men by singularly benevolent miracles which he works as a confirmation of his mission. He stores these things in his heart, little thinking that they would ever be of any practical service to him. It comes to pass on a certain day that his son falls sick, — perhaps his only son, one very dear to his father's heart, — the sickness, instead of diminishing, gradually increases. Fever breathes its hot breath upon the child, and seems to dry up all the moisture in his body, and to blast the bloom from his cheek. The father consults every physician within his reach; they look upon the child and candidly pronounce him hopeless. No cure can possibly be wrought; The child is at the

point of death; the arrow of death has almost sunk into his flesh; it has well nigh penetrated his heart; he is not near death merely, but at death's very point; he has been forced by disease upon the barbed arrows of that insatiate archer. The father now bethinks himself and calls to recollection the stories he had heard of the cures wrought by Jesus of Nazareth. There is a little faith in his soul; though but a little, still enough to make him use every endeavor to test the truth of what he has heard."

And so he acts on what he's heard. This is how faith demonstrates itself initially and it's how faith continues to function – it acts on what it hears. There's a similarity here between this Nobleman and the citizens of Samaria. They too acted on what they heard when the woman at the well told them of a man who had revealed to her everything she'd done. They acted on what they heard her say and made their way to Christ.

This is what you must do especially if you've never done it before. Some of you here this morning are quite young. You've heard your parents speak about Jesus. If you're homeschooled, as many of you are, you've heard your mom or your dad teach you about Jesus. And when you come to church you hear about Jesus. You're hearing about Him just now. I've been called of God to tell you all about Him, and not only that He went about doing good and that He performed many miracles, but also that He's mighty to save. You need Him as your Savior. He, alone can save you from your sin.

So you've heard about Him many times, I trust. But did you know that you must act on what you've heard. It's not enough for you to simply hear and not act on what you hear. How would it have been for the Nobleman's son to hear of the healing miracles of Jesus but not acted on what he heard? His son most certainly would have died and the irony would have been that someone was not that far away that could have helped the Nobleman's son, but because the Nobleman wouldn't have acted, his son wouldn't have been healed but would have died instead?

And so the same thing apply to you, boys and girls, and moms and dads. Faith acts on what it hears. I hope you're here this morning acting on what you've heard and because you've heard of Jesus mighty to save you've acted on that knowledge by coming to church to worship Him today. That's a good way to act on what you've heard. But if you've never acted on what you've heard by coming to Christ by faith then that must be where you begin.

And even though acting on what you've heard is the initial action of faith, it's also the continual action of faith. Faith compels you to worship Christ, and faith compels you to sing to Christ, and faith compels you to give thanks to Christ and to praise His holy name. Don't be complacent on this point. What a shame it would be for anyone here on that coming judgment day to stand before Christ and say to Him – *yes, I've heard of you, Jesus. I've heard of the miracles you performed; I've heard of how you died on the cross and rose again.* To say to Jesus merely that you've heard of Him will not avail you anything. What Christ will want to know is whether or not you acted on what you heard by going to

Christ by faith. Oh I hope and pray that each one here will be able to give a good answer to the question – have you acted on what you heard.

So this is where faith originates and this is how faith is improved, when a believer acts on what he hears. But let's consider next that if you would improve your faith:

II. You Must be Willing to Take Christ's Rebuke

Notice here what Christ says to the Nobleman in v. 48 *Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.* Our King James Bibles do us good service in this verse. The word *ye* is a plural word, you see. And what that indicates to us is that Christ was not just addressing the Nobleman himself but he was addressing the crowd that was apparently with the Nobleman.

It would seem, wouldn't it, that the word of the plight of this Nobleman had spread very rapidly among the inhabitants of Cana of Galilee. Perhaps they were anxious and excited at the prospects of seeing Christ perform yet again another spectacular feat. How impressive this prophet of God must have seemed to them but how they failed to see that Christ was so much more than a miracle working prophet. He had come into this world for a purpose that went way beyond the health and well being of folks during their short time in this sin-cursed world. He had come to bear their sins. He had come to accomplish redemption. How shallow these people must have seemed to Christ who were exclusively focused on the here and now, and so Christ would test this Nobleman's faith by linking him to the kind of crowd that was only interested in signs and wonders. *Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe* He says to the Nobleman and those who were gathered around him.

It reminds me of another instance in which a Gentile woman sought after Christ to deliver her daughter from demon possession. Christ had a testing word for that woman on that occasion when He said to her in Mt. 15:26 *It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.* And on that occasion the woman would not give up. She would own the title of *dog* and would go on and plead with Christ - *Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.* And as a result of her humility she, like the Centurion in Mt. 8 would be commended for her great faith. Great faith, you see, is humble faith. It's the kind of faith that owns the rebuke of Christ.

So when Christ seems to put you off, or may seem to answer you harshly by reminding you of where you really are or what you really amount to, don't despise his chastisements or His testings. There is a purpose of grace behind those chastisements and testings. His aim is to take you higher but before you can go higher you must first go lower. So we read in Prov. 15:33 *The fear of the LORD [is] the instruction of wisdom; and before honour [is] humility.* And again in Prov. 18:12 *Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour [is] humility.*

It's worth noting here that in the case of the Gentile woman and in the case of this Nobleman they both continue to press Christ with their burdens. So the Nobleman says in

response to being mere sign seeker in v. 49 *Sir, come down ere my child die*. Here is persevering faith. Here is the kind of faith that doesn't give up. And that's how you improve your faith. You don't give up in your pleading with Christ. When Christ said in the sermon on the mount Mt. 7:7 that you're to *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you*, He gave 3 imperatives – ask, seek, and knock. Each one of these verbs is an imperative verb which means that these are commands. You're commanded to ask, seek, and knock. But we need to take the grammar lesson one more step by noting that each one of these imperatives and also present tense imperatives. And in Greek a present tense verb means a continuous action verb. And what this means, then, is that you are keep asking and keep seeking and keep knocking. Don't give up in the exercise of your faith.

Your Lord would test you to see how serious you are. Your Lord would test you to see if you're willing to humble yourself. Another scene comes to mind from the Old Testament. It's the scene of Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord at Penual in Genesis 32. You remember Jacob's word in Gen. 32:26? *I will not let thee go, except thou bless me*. That's the kind of persevering spirit the Lord wants to see in your faith. In Luke 18 Christ explains the reason for His testings. Listen to what it says in Lk. 18:7,8 *And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?*

How then do you improve your faith? I might have included a point, I suppose, on the need to recognize your need for improvement but I think I've made that point in my introduction and throughout the study thus far. Don't be complacent with regard to the level of your faith. There's definitely room for improvement in all our lives. And if you would improve your faith you must act on what you hear concerning Christ and you must be willing to take Christ's rebukes, realizing as you must that there is a purpose of grace behind your Savior's rebukes. Consider with me next that if you would improve your faith:

III. You Must Take Christ at His Word

Listen to the word that Christ gives to the Nobleman in v. 50 *Go thy way; thy son liveth*. Here's a notable contrast between the Nobleman and the Centurion in Mt. 8. In the case of the Centurion, who possessed great faith, he didn't feel the need to have Christ come to his house in person. The nature of his faith was such that he believed in the power and authority of Christ.

Listen to the words of Mt. 8:8,9 *The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it*.

And because the Centurion recognized such power and authority in Christ, Christ commends him for the greatness of his faith. I know I've told you before but it bears

repeating that there's only two instances in which Christ commends folks for the greatness of their faith. There's the case of the Gentile woman I cited earlier from Matthew 15 and there's the case of the Gentile Centurion in Mt. 8. It's worth noting here at this point in our study of John's gospel, that in the case of the Samaritans that we looked at earlier in John 4 the Samaritans did not see Christ perform any miracles. They acted on what they heard from the woman at the well and then they heard Christ for themselves and took Him at His word.

Now in the case of this Nobleman, you can see how Christ would require of him the same kind of thing that Christ would see in the Centurion. The Centurion would not feel the need for the personal presence of Christ but would have Christ simply speak the word with power and authority. Now in the case before us with this Nobleman, Christ would require the same thing from him. In other words the Nobleman too would have to take Christ at His word. *Go thy way; thy son liveth*. Christ would not go with him. If the Nobleman would have Christ perform this miracle then he must obtain a higher view of Christ's power and authority, the same view the Centurion had.

And the good news in this instance was that the Nobleman did take Christ at His word. So we go on to read in v. 50 *And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way*. Can you see the improvement now in his faith? Now his faith resembles the greatness of the Centurion's faith. His view of Christ is elevated so that he believes that the power and authority of Christ extended way beyond the need to have the personal presence of Christ at his home immediately before his dying son.

And so he goes his way and soon learns through his servants that the fever left his son at the precise time that Christ told him to go his way. And so is this case with you and me. We must take Christ at His word. And we must gain higher views of Christ's power and authority and I might add that we need higher views of His mercy and His grace. It's not hard, you know, to talk yourself out of the blessing of God. Why should God bless you by answering your prayers? Are you worthy of God's blessing? Do you deserve the things you seek Christ for? Should He hear your prayers for the salvation of loved ones or for your own growth in grace when you fall so short of His glory?

The devil would certainly do all in his power to convince you that grace couldn't possibly be greater than your sins. Can you believe that God will give you a favorable answer to your prayers by His grace when you find yourself constantly having to go to Christ for forgiveness of your sins? The answer to what may seem to be a dilemma is found by taking God at His word and God is the One who has said that *where sin abounded, grace did much more abound* (Rom. 5:20).

So act on what you've heard of Christ and on what you've learned about the gospel of Christ. And don't give up. Continue asking, seeking, knocking, pleading, wrestling and praying through the tests and the afflictions and the chastisements of your Lord. His design is to take you both higher and deeper and to bring you closer to Himself. He doesn't want you to be complacent in your faith. He doesn't want you so easily satisfied with a lack of

spiritual growth or a lack of increase to your faith. He took this Nobleman to a higher level and His design is to do the same with you and me. And could I point out as a final word of encouragement for you to pursue greater faith that when this Nobleman at last returned home, and heard the reports of his servants about the time of his son's healing and then saw his healed son, we're told in v. 53 *So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.*

How do you suppose that Nobleman would have spoken to his wife and his son and his servants and any other children he might have had about Jesus Christ? Surely he would have magnified Christ to them. Surely he would have spoken of Christ's great power and authority and the blessing behind the power of His word. And surely he would have exhorted and encouraged each member in his household to take Jesus at His word. This is where a faith that might start small eventually arrives.

Isn't that a faith worth pursuing? Isn't that the kind of faith you desire for yourself and your house? Don't be complacent about the level or quality of your faith. Act on what you've heard; persevere through every obstacle and take Christ at His word and the result will be great blessings and great confirmations of those blessings. May our prayer then be the prayer of the disciples in Lk. 17:15 who requested simply: *Lord, Increase our faith.*