

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES TITLE: CHURCH ATTENDANCE | SERMON TITLE: WHAT FAITH CAN SEE

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Man's Deepest Response to God

Question for you: What does God require of you? Can you call to mind all the various commands from Genesis to Revelation? I bet you can't. That's way too much. Let's simplify it a bit: What does God require of people in the OT? I've heard there are 613 commandments in the law, though I confess I've never counted.

That's still too much. How about the famous statement of Micah the prophet?

Micah 6:6-8 ⁶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with¹ thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,¹ and to walk humbly with your God?

That's a great text. But we can break it down even further. Here's Jesus' summary of God's moral will:

Matthew 22:35-40 ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Well that's hard to beat. Do we have our answer then? Is love the deepest thing God requires of us? Is love to God the fundamental human response, religiously speaking?

No. No it's not. That might surprise you since love to God is the greatest commandment in all the law, and in all the moral will of God. So wouldn't that make it the fundamental human response to God?

I say it doesn't. I tell you that the fundamental human response to God, the greatest requirement, and the deepest thing which God calls for is not exactly a commandment.

Now in a sense it is a commandment, according to the Apostle John. But if it is a commandment it sure is a funny one. I mean to say it is very unlike every other commandment there is, including the command to love God. Whereas every other command of God calls for a man to produce, the one I have in mind calls for a man to receive what God has produced.

Every other command calls for man to act; this command calls for man to let himself be acted upon. Every other command calls for a man to stand up and take action; this command calls for a man to lay down on his back and surrender.

You probably know by now I'm talking about the act of Faith. Faith in God and Christ is what God requires of you. It is the deepest religious act of man. It is the fundamental human response to God.

This is so much the case that if we might suppose a man who, hypothetically, possessed every other Biblical quality and obeyed every other Biblical command but had not faith he would merely be the greatest of all lost men. But if you supposed a man who had Biblical faith but none of the other qualities or obedience, never fear; he soon shall have them all. And this would be a saved man.

Faith: Perceptive Power, Receptive Power

But what is faith? Our generation suffers from a common, and blasphemous, mis-definition of faith. It runs something like this: "Faith is the act of stubbornly believing something for which there is no evidence, and which has been constantly disproved since the enlightenment."

I confess to you I don't like the word faith very much anymore, because of that. I also encourage you to remember that's what your unbelieving friend or family hear when you use the word. Use it with caution.

Well, what is faith then? Can we get a better definition? There's an excellent one in Hebrews 11. Let me give you another that seeks to take into account the whole sweep of Biblical revelation:

"Faith is the perceptive and receptive trust which a man exercises toward God, especially in terms of God's goodness, wisdom and power, on the basis of God's redemptive acts in history, culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and in opposition to the primal and ever-present slander of the Serpent."

So let's zoom in on one part of that definition: Faith is a perceptive and a receptive trust. What is meant by that?

When I say faith is a receptive trust I mean it is a trust in which we receive something. So, to have biblical faith in Christ is to receive Christ. To believe God's promise is to receive, and grasp God's promise for yourself. This is what is meant when men say faith is the empty hand which takes hold of Christ as a gift. Faith is receptive.

And faith is a perceptive trust. By this I mean that in biblical faith we perceive, or see something. So, to believe in Christ, in this sense, is to see Christ, or to see things about Christ. To believe the Gospel is to perceive the majesty and glory of the Gospel.

Now for the rest of this sermon I want to focus in on this second aspect of faith; faith is a perceptive faculty of the redeemed human soul. Faith is a power of spiritual sight, a power which God grants to the sinner and by which the sinner sees certain things, and in seeing them, the sinner is saved.

And we'll follow the lead of today's text as we explore the perceptive element of faith. So let me show you from the story 3 Things that Faith Can See.

3 Things Faith Can See; The Kingship of Christ

The first thing Faith Can See is the royalty, the dignity, even the deity of Jesus Christ.

Blind Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside near Jericho when he hears a crowd come passing by. He inquires and finds out Jesus of Nazareth is in the crowd. Jesus is very famous at this point so we aren't surprised to see Bartimaeus begin crying loudly to get his attention.

And what title does Bartimaeus give to Jesus? "Son of David." What does that mean? Simply, it is a title for the Jewish Messiah, the coming King of Israel who would destroy the enemies and free Israel from their slavery.

Now here's what's remarkable about this: This is the one time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus is called Son of David. Not even his disciples ever use this title, let alone an outsider whose full time occupation is sitting blindly by the roadside begging for alms. Recall that the people still have varied opinions about Jesus; it's not as if everyone knows what we know, that Jesus is God's Son and the Christ. It's actually stunning, then, to have this outsider interpret Jesus messianically.

On the other hand, this isn't the only time an outsider perceives the royal dignity of Jesus. Remember the Centurion, whose great faith was praised by Jesus? What made his faith great? Just this: The centurion perceived the authority of Jesus. He saw through the unimpressive exterior, down to the reality of power and prerogative which resided in Jesus.

And all of this is entirely relevant to the situation in the Gospel, since Jesus came to initiate a kingdom. Who better to do that than a King?

But we can go even further. When Jesus calls the man and asks what he desires, how does the man address Jesus? He uses, not the word "rabbi," but the word "rabboni", which the lexicons call a heightened form of rabbi, that is, an even more honorific title for a Jewish teacher. Listen to what one commentator says about this word:

"In extant Jewish literature rabbouni is seldom used with reference to humanity, and practically never as a form of address. It is frequently used as an address to God in prayer, however."

The point is that Mark's readers should be stunned by the impressive perception of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is seeing Jesus more clearly than almost anybody, perhaps more than the 12 at present. And folks, Bartimaeus is blind!

You see that blindness is no obstacle to saving faith; indeed, biblically speaking, it might be a help.

Faith Can See the royalty, the dignity, even the deity of Jesus Christ. Faith sees in Jesus the fairest of ten thousand, a treasure trove of beauty, the source of all light and truth, even goodness itself. Faith can see surpassing excellence in Jesus. Faith laughs at a hundred PhD's in the religion department, all busy investigating the true identity of Jesus. Then Faith does an end-run around them and embraces Jesus as the Greatest Man Who Ever Lives; not lived, lives.

Consider whether you see such infinite value in Jesus. Be honest; do you find him lovely? Is he attractive in your eyes? My friends, in all the universe that is the only question there really is.

The Sufficiency of Christ as Savior

Here's the second thing Faith Can See: The Sufficiency of Christ as a Healer and Savior.

When the blind man calls Jesus "Son of David" he also pleads for mercy. Now he's used to pleading for alms; that's because he believes the most people can do for him is give him some money. But he's not asking for money right now.

He wants healing. He wants an end to his blindness. And he's heard enough about Jesus of Nazareth to boldly and humbly cry out to Jesus to heal him.

We're amused to find Jesus asking the blind man what he wants! "What do you mean, what does he want? Everyone knows what he wants!" But Jesus asks him, and the blind man asks for sight, knowing Jesus is a competent and powerful healer.

So what's so impressive about that? Everyone knew Jesus was a healer, right? Everyone looked at him and perceived at least this basic fact, didn't they? Wrong.

Remember after the transfiguration, how the man with the demonized boy asked Jesus for help, "if he could"? How did Jesus like that? "If you can"! Brothers, not everyone had the faith to perceive the healing and saving sufficiency of Jesus. But blind Bartimaeus does.

Now you might wonder why I say the healing and the saving sufficiency of Christ. The healing is obvious in the text but where is the saving?

When Jesus heals Bartimaeus he says to him, "Your faith has made you well." Or does he?

That's what most translations say. The word behind "made you well" is *sozo*, "save." It could be translated, "Your faith has saved you." I think it should be translated that way to retain the ambiguity that I believe Mark wanted to express.

Of course in the story Jesus is talking about the man's eyesight; or he's talking about his eyesight at least. The fact is, however, Jesus came to do a whole lot more than heal blindness, as Mark's Gospel has shown. And the first readers of this Gospel, reading it in Greek, couldn't possibly miss the double meaning present in a sentence containing the words "saved" and "faith".

So I think that as Mark writes this sentence, he sort of looks up at the reader and winks. His language subtly, or not so subtly, points to the deeper issue of his Gospel. Faith saves a man.

So faith sees in Jesus a healer, yes, but far more, a Savior. Faith doesn't find Jesus to be an interesting historical study, or a political talking point. Faith sees deeper. Faith perceives that Jesus is exactly what our wretched condition calls for. If anything can rescue us from an evil fate, it's Jesus the Savior.

And this is more than seeing Jesus as an important piece of Christian theology. Jesus doesn't exist so that we'll have something to theologize about. Faith sees that the Son of God came to save his people, to destroy the works of the devil, to love us and give himself for us. Someone needed to tell me this when I was newly saved.

And I've found young men generally have this problem; seemingly being more interested in Jesus the theological theorem than Jesus the Savior. But the more genuine our faith, the more we'll see Jesus as a Savior.

I commend to you the theological approach of another former blind man who, when being questioned about his theology of Jesus, said this:

John 9:25 ²⁵ He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

I suggest you arrange your whole system of theology to flow from this basic fact. Jesus is Savior; that's the first thing, and it is perhaps the reality through which we ought to approach all other areas of theology.

Your Faith Saves You

Now we have to take a quick detour to notice the relationship between faith and salvation. Some people insist on demeaning the act of faith in an effort to remove the human role in salvation. This is the basic error of hypercalvinism which can be detected in every theological move they make.

You've heard some well meaning person say, "It isn't faith that saves us; it's God that saves us!" Now we appreciate that they are trying to make man low and God high. But here's the problem: We are only authorized to make man as low as the Scripture makes him. There is such a thing as taking away from man in our theology what Scripture does not take away from him.

And we can all agree on this. Consider, if we should labor to have a low view of man in our theology, what better position could we adopt than evolution? You know very well evolution places man far lower than Scripture does. But making man low isn't our guiding star; the Bible is. It's never about what we think would work best theologically; it is always and only and ever about What Has Been Written.

So here's what has been written on faith: "Your faith has saved you." Friends, faith does save you, just as much as your hand saves you when it grasps the life-preserver thrown to you to keep you from drowning. If after coming to shore someone asked you, "What saved you? The preserver, the man who threw it, or your hand?"

Well, all of them, actually. But the empty hand that grasps the rope is part of that. Yes, indeed. Your faith has saved you.

This is because faith is necessary to salvation; without it you cannot be saved. He who believes will be saved, he who does not believe is condemned. At this level, faith makes the difference. And it isn't God who exercises faith for you; God grants the faith, but you exercise it. God is not responsible to have saving faith; we are. That's the end of our detour.

Christ Must Be Followed

The third and last thing Faith Can See is that Christ Must be Followed.

After Jesus heals the man Mark says he followed him on the way. Now this little phrase, "on the way," is repeatedly used in this middle section of the Gospel to describe Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Literarily, it would seem Mark creates this picture of Jesus leading, and his disciples following, as a sort of picture of discipleship. Those who perceive the worth of Jesus follow him on the way, a way which passes through the cross and on to resurrection. How's that for a picture of discipleship?

Then there is this word "follow." This also becomes a semi-technical word in Mark for discipleship to Jesus. One writer says that for Mark, this is more than a circumstantial note to end the story. Mark is saying something about Blind Bartimaeus.

Mark's telling us that Bartimaeus is a true, even an ideal disciple of Jesus. So, this is more than a description of where Bartimaeus went next; this is a picture of discipleship.

In other words, faith can see that Jesus must be followed. How many there are who are content to come to Jesus for forgiveness and psychological well-being but that's where they leave it. They go no further. Their kind of faith issues in no action. It has no life. It has no motive power. Nothing happens.

Saving faith is otherwise. It looks in and perceives that after Christ has changed a man's life that man has nothing left to do but follow him to the end, to the very death if need be. And this is fitting; Jesus is a King. Jesus is a Savior. Jesus is a blaze of beauty and wonder. Who could possibly see him and walk away unchanged? Who could really see him and walk away uncommitted?

No, the soul that sees Jesus, by faith, sweetly and wonderfully pledges body, bone and blood; soul, mind, heart, future, everything. The man who really sees Jesus is so ravished he will give himself over to death if that be Jesus' will. And he won't do it grudgingly.

It is a given that such a man will hand himself over to Jesus without reserve, to serve and obey, to learn, to grow, to take on himself a whole new way of life, to lose friend and family and vocation and wealth, to have his whole life turned up-side down. For the soul that sees Jesus all of that just goes without saying.

Faith sees that Jesus must be followed. What else could I do now? Now that I can see?

Can You See?

Well, I have nothing left to do but ask you this: Can You See? Do you see the royalty, the worth, the deity of Christ? Do you see his sufficiency to save, that he is all you really need and a thousand times more than you need? Do you see he must be followed in a life of learning and obedience? Can you see?

Friends, this is not a time to flatter yourself. Do you really see? Maybe you hear people speak lovingly and sweetly about Christ and it creeps you out? Or maybe it's just incoherent to you? Maybe it makes no sense? You look into your own life and find no such experience of Christ there.

I've heard when people would come to the Puritans, uncertain of their salvation, some of them would respond this way: "If you see it, you've got it." Look at Jesus Christ. Do you see glory, or shame? Are you attracted, or repulsed? Or bored? Do you see exactly the remedy you need, or do you wonder what all the fuss is about? Is your soul gripped by his command, or do you disobey him with ease, without hardly a thought? Don't fool yourself. Faith Can See.