

On Faith

By John Wesley

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Sermon Title On Faith

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "Without faith it is impossible to please him." Heb. 11:6.

INTRO

1. But what is Faith? It is a divine "evidence and conviction of things not seen;" of things which are not seen now, whether they are visible or invisible in their own nature. Particularly, it is a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God. This is the most comprehensive definition of faith that ever was or can be given; as including every species of faith, from the lowest to the highest. And yet I do not remember any eminent writer that has given a full and clear account of the several sorts of it, among all the verbose and tedious treatises which have been published upon the subject.

2. Something indeed of a similar kind has been written by that great and good man, Mr. Fletcher, in his "Treatise on the various Dispensations of the Grace of God." Herein he observes, that there are four dispensations that are distinguished from each other by the degree of light which God vouchsafes to them that are under each. A small degree of light is given to those that are under the heathen dispensation. These generally believed, "that there was a God, and that he was a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." But a far more considerable degree of light was vouchsafed to the Jewish nation; inasmuch as to them "were entrusted" the grand means of light, "the oracles of God." Hence many

of these had clear and exalted views of the nature and attributes of God; of their duty to God and man; yea, and of the great promise made to our first parents, and transmitted by them to their posterity, that "the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent"s head."

3. But above both the heathen and Jewish dispensation was that of John the Baptist. To him a still clearer light was given; and he himself "a burning and shining light." To him it was given to "behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of tile world." Accordingly our Lord himself affirms, that "of all which had been born of women," there had not till that time arisen "a greater than John the Baptist." But nevertheless he informs us, "He that is least in the kingdom of God," the Christian dispensation, "is greater than he." By one that is under the Christian dispensation, Mr. Fletcher means one that has received the Spirit of adoption; that has the Spirit of God witnessing "with his spirit, that he is a child of God." In order to explain this still farther, I will endeavour, by the help of God, First, To point out the several sorts of faith: And, Secondly, to draw some practical inferences.

I

I. In the First place, I will endeavour to point out the several sorts of faith. It would be easy, either to reduce these to a smaller number, or to divide them into a greater. But it does not appear that this would answer any valuable purpose.

1. The lowest sort of faith if it be any faith at all, is that of a Materialist, -- a man who, like the late Lord Kames, believes there is nothing but matter in the universe. I say, if it be any faith at all: for, properly speaking, it is not. It is not "an evidence or conviction of God," for they do not believe there is any; neither is it "a conviction of things not seen," for they deny the existence of such. Or if, for decency"s sake, they allow there is a God, yet they suppose even him to be material. For one of their maxims is, Jupiter est quodcunque vides. "Whatever you see, is God." Whatever you see! A visible, tangible god! Excellent divinity! Exquisite nonsense!

2. The Second sort of faith, if you allow a Materialist to have any, is the

faith of a Deist. I mean, one who believes there is a God, distinct from matter; but does not believe the Bible. Of these we may observe two sorts. One sort are mere beasts in human shape, wholly under the power of the basest passions, and having "a downright appetite to mix with mud." Other Deists are, in most respects, rational creatures, though unhappily prejudiced against Christianity: Most of these believe the being and attributes of God; they believe that God made and governs the world; and that the soul does not die with the body, but will remain for ever in a state of happiness or misery.

3. The next sort of faith is the faith of Heathens, with which I join that of Mahometans. I cannot but prefer this before the faith of the Deists; because, though it embraces nearly the same objects, yet they are rather to be pitied than blamed for the narrowness of their faith. And their not believing the whole truth, is not owing to want of sincerity, but merely to want of light. When one asked Chicali, an old Indian Chief, "Why do not you red men know as much as us white men?" he readily answered, "Because you have the great Word, and we have not."

4. It cannot be doubted, but this plea will avail for millions of modern Heathens. Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required. As to the ancient Heathens, millions of them, likewise were savages. No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had. But many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among Heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by His inward voice, all the essentials of true religion. Yea, and so was that Mahometan, and Arabian, who, a century or two ago, wrote the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdan. The story seems to be feigned; but it contains all the principles of pure religion and undefiled.

5. But, in general, we may surely place the faith of a Jew above that of a Heathen or Mahometan. By Jewish faith, I mean, the faith of those who lived between the giving of the law and the coming of Christ. These, that is, those that were serious and sincere among them, believed all that is written in the Old Testament. In particular, they believed that, in the fulness of time, the Messiah would appear, "to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, and bring in everlasting

righteousness."

6. It is not so easy to pass any judgment concerning the faith of our modern Jews. It is plain, "the veil is still upon their hearts" when Moses and the Prophets are read. The god of this world still hardens their hearts, and still blinds their eyes, "lest at any time the light of the glorious gospel" should break in upon them. So that we may say of this people, as the Holy Ghost said to their forefathers, "The heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed ; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them." (Acts 28:27.) Yet it is not our part to pass sentence upon them, but to leave them to their own Master.

7. I need not dwell upon the faith of John the Baptist, any more than the dispensation which he was under; because these, as Mr. Fletcher well describes them, were peculiar to himself. Setting him aside, the faith of the Roman Catholics, in general, seems to be above that of the ancient Jews. If most of these are volunteers in faith, believing more than God has revealed, it cannot be denied that they believe all which God has revealed, as necessary to salvation. In this we rejoice on their behalf: We are glad that none of those new Articles, which they added, at the Council of Trent, "to the faith once delivered to the saints, does so materially contradict any of the ancient Articles, as to render them of no effect.

8. The faith of the Protestants, in general, embraces only those truths as necessary to salvation, which are clearly revealed in the oracles of God. Whatever is plainly declared in the Old and New Testament is the object of their faith. They believe neither more nor less than what is manifestly contained in, and provable by, the Holy Scriptures. The word of God is "a lantern to their feet, and a light in all their paths." They dare not, on any pretence, go from it, to the right hand or to the left. The written word is the whole and sole rule of their faith, as well as practice. They believe whatsoever God has declared, and profess to do whatsoever he hath commanded. This is the proper faith of Protestants: By this they will abide, and no other.

9. Hitherto faith has been considered chiefly as an evidence and conviction of such or such truths. And this is the sense wherein it is taken at this day in every part of the Christian world. But, in the mean time, let it be carefully observed, (for eternity depends upon it,) that neither the faith of a Roman Catholic, nor that of a Protestant, if it contains no more than this, no more than the embracing such and such truths, will avail any more before God, than the faith of a Mahometan or a Heathen; yea, of a Deist or Materialist. For can this "faith save him?" Can it save any man either from sin or from hell? No more than it could save Judas Iscariot: No more than it could save the devil and his angels; all of whom are convinced that every title of Holy Scripture is true.

10. But what is the faith which is properly saving; which brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even in its infant state, enables every one that possesses it to "fear God and work righteousness." And whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares, is "accepted of him." He actually is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a servant of God, not properly a son. Meantime, let it be well observed, that "the wrath of God" no longer "abideth on him."

11. Indeed, nearly fifty years ago, when the Preachers, commonly called Methodists, began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprized of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand, that even one "who feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him." In consequence of this, they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, "Do you know that your sins are forgiven?" And upon their answering, "No," immediately replied, "Then you are a child of time devil." No; this does not follow. It might have been said, (and it is all that can be said with propriety,) "Hitherto you are only a servant, you are not a child of God. You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him, and you shall see greater things than these.""

12. And, indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will

receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the faith of the children of God, by his revealing his only begotten Son in their hearts. Thus, the faith of a child is, properly and directly, a divine conviction, whereby every child of God is enabled to testify, "The life that I now live, I live by faith the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit, that he is a child of God. So the Apostle writes to the Galatians: "Ye are the sons of God by faith. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father;" that is, giving you a childlike confidence in him, together with a kind affection toward him. This then it is, that (if St. Paul was taught of God, and wrote as he was moved by the Holy Ghost) properly constitutes the difference between a servant of God, and a child of God. "He that believeth," as a child of God, "hath the witness in himself." This the servant hath not. Yet let no man discourage him; rather, lovingly exhort him to expect it every moment.

13. It is easy to observe, that all the sort of faith which we can conceive are reducible to one or other of the preceding. But let us covet the best gifts, and follow the most excellent way. There is no reason why you should be satisfied with the faith of a Materialist, a Heathen, or a Deist; nor, indeed, with that of a servant. I do not know that God requires it at your hands. Indeed, if you have received this, you ought not to cast it away; you ought not in anywise to undervalue it but to be truly thankful for it. Yet, in the mean time, beware how you rest here: Press on till you receive the Spirit of adoption: Rest not, till that Spirit clearly witnesses with your spirit, that you are a child of God.

II

II. I proceed, in the Second place, to draw a few inferences from the preceding observations.

1. And I would, First, infer, in how dreadful a state, if there be a God, is a Materialist one who denies not only the "Lord that bought him," but also the Lord that made him. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." But it is impossible he should have any faith at all; -- any conviction of any invisible world; for he believes there is no such thing;

-- any conviction the being of a God; for a material God is no God at all. For you cannot possibly suppose the sun or skies to be God, any more than you can suppose a God of wood or stone. And, farther, whosoever believes all things to be mere matter must, of course, believe that all things are governed by dire necessity -- necessity that is as inexorable as the winds; as ruthless as the rocks as merciless as the waves that dash upon them, or the poor shipwrecked mariners! Who then shall help thee, thou poor desolate wretch, when thou art most in need of help? Winds, and seas, and rocks, and storms! Such are the best helpers which the Materialists can hope for!

2. Almost equally desolate is the case of the poor Deist, how learned, yea, how moral, soever he be. For you, likewise, though you may not advert it, are really "without God in the world." See your religion, the "Religion of nature, delineated" by ingenious Mr. Wollaston; whom I remember to have seen when I was at school, attending the public service at the Charter-house chapel. Does he found his religion upon God? Nothing less. He founds it upon truth, abstract truth. But does he not by that expression mean God? No; he sets him out of the question, and builds a beautiful castle in the air, without being beholden either to Him or his word. See your smooth-tongued orator of Glasgow, one of the most pleasing writers of the age! Has he any more to do with God, on his system, than Mr. Wollaston? Does he deduce his "Idea of Virtue" from him, as the Father of Lights, the Source of all good? Just the contrary. He not only plans his whole theory without taking the least notice of God, but toward the close of it proposes that question, "Does the having an eye to God in an action enhance the virtue of it?" He answers, "No; it is so far from this, that if in doing a virtuous, that is, a benevolent, action, a man mingles a desire to please God, the more there is of this desire, the less virtue there is in that action?" Never before did I meet with either Jew, Turk, or Heathen who so flatly renounced God as this Christian Professor!

3. But with Heathens, Mahometans, and Jews we have at present nothing to do; only we may wish that their lives did not shame many of us that are called Christians. We have not much more to do with the members of the Church of Rome. But we cannot doubt, that many of them, like the excellent Archbishop of Cambray, still retain

(notwithstanding many mistakes) that faith that worketh by love. And how many of the Protestants enjoy this, whether members of the Church of England, or of other congregations? We have reason to believe a considerable number, both of one and the other, (and, blessed be God, an increasing number,) in every part of the land.

4. One more, I exhort you that fear God and work righteousness, you that are servants of God, First, flee from all sin, as from the face of a serpent; being Quick as the apple of an eye, The slightest touch of sin to feel; and to work righteousness, to the utmost of the power you now have to abound in works both of piety and mercy: And, Secondly, continually to cry to God, that he would reveal his Son in your hearts, to the intent you may be no more servants but sons; having his love shed abroad in your hearts, and walking in "the glorious liberty of the, children of God."

5. I exhort you, Lastly, who already feel the Spirit of God witnessing with your spirit that you are the children of God, follow the advice of the Apostle: Walk in all the good works whereunto ye are created in Christ Jesus. And then, "leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, and not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God," go on to perfection. Yea, and when ye have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has circumcised your hearts, and enabled you to love him with all your heart and with all your soul, think not of resting there. That is impossible. You cannot stand still; you must either rise or fall; rise higher or fail lower. Therefore the voice of God to the children of Israel, to the children of God, is, "Go forward!" "Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forward unto those that are before, press on to the mark, for the prize of your high calling of God in Christ Jesus!"

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