

Faith: False, Weak, True

John 4:43-54

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⁴⁶ So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” ⁴⁹ The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” ⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴ This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. – John 4:43-54, ESV

What is True Faith? How Much Do We Need?

Have you ever been deeply disappointed in someone? Have you every trusted someone only to have that person violate your trust and let you down? How did it feel? If you’ve ever had this experience, then you know what faith is. It is trust. And most of us have learned the hard way that placing our trust in human beings is a risky business. People are sinful, weak, unreliable. They tend to break their promises and fail to keep their commitments. In fact, if we’re really honest, we know that we have not just been disappointed in others, but we have likely disappointed others ourselves. We have over-committed ourselves and then dropped the ball. We have had the best of intentions but forgotten or failed to keep our commitments. We have even, at times, been purely selfish and inconsiderate and have let people down as a result.

Today’s passage is an exploration of faith in Jesus Christ, continuing this exploration from the end of the story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well and the people of Sychar. When it comes to faith in Jesus, many people wonder if they have enough faith and how they can get more. In Luke 17:5-6, “*the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.*” (ESV)

For the disciples, the issue of concern was the amount of their faith. Jesus does not rebuke them for their request, for they were right to seek more faith and to ask Jesus for it. He is the Author and Finisher of our faith, and the apostles knew they could not just produce their own faith. Yet for Jesus, the question was not whether or not they had enough faith but whether or not their faith was genuine and living. Even a very small amount of genuine, living faith would be more powerful than they could imagine. His response had to be encouraging and challenging to them at the same time.

Today, we see the true and saving faith of the Samaritan inhabitants of Sychar contrasted with the false and self-centered faith of the Galileans. We also see a royal official come to true faith, as his false faith is graciously met by Jesus with a powerful word that leads to true faith and salvation for him and his household.

A. False Faith: The Galilean Welcome, vv. 43-45

After the two days he departed for Galilee. ⁴⁴ (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) ⁴⁵ So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast.

Jesus remained in Sychar for only two days, long enough to see many people come to believe in Him, but not so long as to deter Him from His primary mission field and calling among the Jewish people. So, after two days, Jesus leaves Samaria and heads north to Galilee.

I. The Confusion of v. 44

John here inserts a parenthetical comment that is a bit confusing. Matthew and Mark both record Jesus saying these words, “*A prophet is not without honor, except in his own hometown.*” In these Gospels, Jesus says these words in response to the unbelief of the Galileans, who can’t accept Jesus as the Messiah because they know His family and it seems unbelievable that the local carpenter’s son should be the Son of God.

Here in John’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus leaves for Galilee because Jesus Himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown. So Jesus is intentionally choosing to go someplace where He knows He will not be honored. This seems strange enough on its own, but then verse 45 indicates that the Galileans welcomed Him, having seen all that He had done in Jerusalem at the feast.

2. The Situational Irony of vv. 43-45

It seems like John inserts the parenthetical comment of verse 44 so we won’t misunderstand the nature of the kind welcome Jesus received in Galilee. Jesus had made a big splash in Jerusalem. He had driven out the money-changers and animal-sellers, and He had apparently done some miracles not recorded in John’s Gospel, based on what Nicodemus said to Him in John 3:2, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*”

So the hometown boy has gone to the capital city and made a name for Himself and has now returned home. The people of Galilee are not welcoming Jesus because they believe in Him and they want to follow Him, but because they are hoping to see some miracles and have Him do some great stuff for them.

This is greatly ironic in contrast to the Samaritans of Sychar: The people of Sychar had incomplete Scriptures, confused theology and no history with Jesus, yet they welcomed Him to listen to Him, and they believed in Him as the Savior of the world. Jesus didn’t have to do any amazing miracles to impress them, other than His supernatural knowledge of the woman at the well’s past. Here in His hometown area, where people had the Scriptures and had history with Jesus, they were not welcoming Him in order to hear His word and believe, but only to see some great miracles and be blessed or entertained. They don’t want Jesus, the Savior of the world, they want Jesus the amazing miracle-worker. That is not honoring Jesus, and that is not real faith.

B. Weak Faith: The Official, vv. 46-49

⁴⁶ So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” ⁴⁹ The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

I. Initial False Faith, vv. 46-47

Jesus enters Cana, the scene of His first sign. Even though this sign was done privately and specifically for the benefit of His disciples, John reminds his readers of the miracle here because word of this wonder had most likely spread throughout the area. After all, the servants who filled the water jars and drew out the wine would hardly have kept quiet about the amazing miracle they had seen and helped execute.

Meanwhile, in Capernaum, a royal official, someone who served in the court of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, had a son who was severely ill, a sickness that was heading for death. It is about 16 miles from Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, to Cana, which lies to the west of Galilee. The terrain is very hilly, so it’s not an easy journey, but the official is desperate, so he sets out to see Jesus at once.

The desperation of the official has him grasping at anything as a possibility for helping his son. He comes to Jesus and asks Him to come down to his house and heal his son. He doesn’t seem to have any real faith in Jesus or any understanding of who He is, or He would have approached with more humility and been better received by Jesus. His request that Jesus “come down and heal his son” is marked more by presumption than by faith. So initially, this official is no different from the rest of the Galileans, just wanting Jesus the miracle-worker to do a miracle for him.

2. The Grace of Jesus, vv. 48-50a

Jesus responds to this official’s false faith and presumption with a gracious rebuke, “*Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.*” This rebuke is gracious, because Jesus is taking the time to show the official what he really needs – faith – and what he’s settling for instead – signs and wonders. While we often want signs and wonders from Christ, what we really need is faith in Christ.

Many people have been disappointed in God because God did not answer a prayer of theirs in a particular way. Sometimes these stories are heart-breaking, including children or other loved ones dying of cancer. But a faith in God which depends on a specific answer to a specific prayer request is not a real and saving faith. Real and saving faith confesses that Jesus is Lord and comes to Jesus for salvation, for forgiveness and redemption.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism question 86 asks “*What is faith in Jesus Christ?*” *The answer:* Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” We see here three things to note:

1. Faith is a saving grace. It is something which comes from God and is given freely, not because we deserve it but because God delights to give it.
2. Faith is centered in the person of Jesus Christ, receiving and resting upon Him alone.
3. Faith is for salvation, as offered in the Gospel. We look to Jesus and receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation, for forgiveness and redemption, not for specific answers to prayer requests for things, even good things.

So Jesus is being gracious because He is telling the official and all those who are listening what they really need and what's keeping them from it. They are addicted to signs and wonders, and they are missing the eternal life in the kingdom of God that is standing right in front of them!

The official responds to Jesus' rebuke with more humility and with an earnest plea, "*Sir, come down before my child dies.*" All the major English translations render the official's response as "Sir," which is a valid way to translate the word he uses, "Kurios." But this same word means Lord and Master, so it is a term of respect and deference. The official has gone from trying to order Jesus around to respectfully and urgently requesting His presence. The grace of Jesus has humbled him.

And so, in response to the official's newfound humility, Jesus says, "*Go; your son will live.*"

C. Saving Faith: In Response to the Word, vv. 50-54

Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him."⁵³ The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household.⁵⁴ This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

I. Faith in the Word of Jesus, vv. 50b-52

The official is now faced with a real faith challenge: Jesus is not going to come down, but He assures the man by His word that his son will live. Jesus doesn't even say, "Go; I have healed your son," but simply, "Go; your son will live."

The official receives this word from Jesus and believes. Specifically, we're told "the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him." Romans 10:17 tells us "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" The word of Christ is both the means of bringing faith to us and the test of whether or not we have faith. When the word of Christ comes to us accompanied by the saving grace of the Holy Spirit, it produces faith and we demonstrate the reality of that faith when we believe in the word.

The Westminster Confession of Faith explains this relationship between the word and faith in Ch. 14, "Of Saving Faith":

The grace of faith, by which the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily produced through the ministry of the Word. This faith is increased and strengthened by the same means, and also by the administration of the sacraments and prayer.

By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatever is revealed in the Word, because of the authority of God himself speaking in it. He also responds differently to what each particular passage contains—obeying the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come.

The evidence that the official believes in the word of Jesus is that he leaves and goes on his way home. He obeys Jesus' command to "Go." He does not argue with Jesus and try to get Jesus to come in person after all. He is content to go his way. It is apparently late enough in the day that he spends the night, either in Cana or along the way to Capernaum, because he meets up with his servants the next day, who tell him that his son is recovering.

How do you respond to the word of God? Does the seed of the word produce the life of faith in your heart? Does the life of faith bear the fruit of obedience? When you hear the word, do you believe? If you truly believe, do you respond in obedience?

2. Saving Faith in the Person of Jesus, vv. 53-54

The official's faith in the word of Christ was not misplaced. Christ had said that his son would live, and his son was recovering and would live. Even more, the grace of Christ was so specific that He chose to heal the son at exactly the time that He spoke to the official. This gave the official unmistakable support for his faith, confirmation that trusting in the word of Christ was right.

What is the relationship between faith and evidence? If you are disbelieving God until God proves Himself to you beyond a reasonable doubt, you will be waiting for a long time. God is not an on-demand circus performer, doing tricks to win your confidence. But if you are trusting in Christ for salvation, God will strengthen and confirm your faith with evidence.

Because I believe in God, I find much evidence to support my faith in the works of creation and providence. I see the handiwork of God in the natural world, and I see the hand of God in history and in my life. It's not hard to see the evidence clearly when I look with eyes of faith. When I doubt, I respond with prayer and with going to the word, and then I can again see the evidence. It's vital that we keep these things straight: The source of our faith is God's grace, not evidence. The seed for our faith is the word and the fuel for our faith is the Holy Spirit. Evidence is helpful and strengthens and confirms the faith that God gives.

So, having his faith strengthened by the evidence of the timing of his son's healing, the official now explicitly transfers his faith from believing in the word of Christ to believing in the person of Christ. Ch. 14 of the Westminster Confession, after discussing the relationship between faith and the word of God, says, "*But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.*" This is what happens now for this official.

He and his whole household believed in Jesus. This is a pattern we see repeatedly in the New Testament: household conversions. When the head of the household believes, the whole household is converted to faith. This is because God is a covenant God who makes and keeps covenant promises to households.

The Second Sign

John concludes this section by telling us “This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.” The first sign was turning water into wine. Interestingly, these are the only two signs in John’s Gospel that are explicitly numbered. John goes on to give five more signs, but they’re not numbered. So, what’s the significance of these two? Well, the first sign shows the supernatural joy and abundant life that Jesus brings and the second shows the victory over death that Jesus brings. The first sign is a sign of the bringing of life, while the second sign is a sign of the defeating of death.

All of Jesus’ signs can be seen this way, either as an abundant provision of life or as the overthrow of the reign of death: the feeding of the 5,000 is another sign of abundant provision of life. So in these two life-and-joy signs, Jesus provides an abundance of wine and bread, something for us to think about as we prepare for the Lord’s Supper next week. In the victory-over-death, or the reverse-the-curse signs, Jesus heals the official’s sick son (saving him from death before he died), heals an invalid in Ch. 5 and a man born blind in Ch. 9. The culminating sign of this second type is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Both types of signs are pointing to the final and ultimate sign, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which is both the final defeat of death and the bringing in of eternal life and joy.

So these first two signs are numbered because they are the two major types of signs that will lead us, in the end, to the resurrection.