

Faithful

The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time Sermon 10

Luke 22:31-34

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

³¹ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” ³³ Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” ³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.” (Luke 22:31-34, ESV)

Today will conclude our fall sermon series, *The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time*. We’ve been focused on one question throughout: *What are the marks of a real disciple? What’s the difference between a casual or cultural Christian, and what the Bible calls a disciple of Jesus Christ?*

We’ve noted nine traits of a disciple so far: Gospeled, Follow, All In, Dependence, Christlike, Not Alone, Member, Witness, Salt & Light. Today we consider the tenth mark, **Faithful**. A disciple has faith in Jesus and remains faithful to Jesus. And he does all of this because Jesus is faithful to him. This will become clearer as we dig in.

Faith—or belief—is essential to every part of a disciple’s life. Jesus’ first sermon opens, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). Responding to Jesus means putting faith in Him, believing in Him and His message. Later, Paul will make the point that faith isn’t merely the door we walk through into the Christian life; but faith is the way we live each moment of it: “we live by faith not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Going as far back as Abraham—who because he “believed God” was “counted righteous” (Gen 15:6)—faith, belief, is at the heart of what it means to know and follow God.

But faith—what someone believes or trusts in—is as tricky as it is important. Even when you look at the Bible, the term for faith can take the sense of concrete fact or ongoing action. One could say, “I affirm the Christian faith.” Meaning, with their mind they agree with the doctrines and truths of Christianity. One could also say, “I have been faithful to the Christian faith.” Here, “*faithful*” means something different than “*faith*.”

Faithful speaks not to an affirmation of the mind, but an ongoing commitment of the heart.

It might be helpful at the outset to suggest these three hues that the term, or idea, “faith” can take on. Think of these as the three “Vs” of faith: Faith involves:

1. Veracity: *My faith is what I affirm as true.*

This is the sense we get in Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”. And you need something you believe in. You need truth bigger than yourself in your life—a north star you can orient yourself towards.

2. Vitality: *My faith is what gives my life meaning and power.*

Without my faith, I’d lose hope and direction. Here, faith is like an electrical cord you plug into a power source—faith is the conduit through which meaning, focus, and hope flow into your life. Biblically, faith connects us to the life of God, and through faith, that life flows into us. This is the sense we get in John 6, “Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:35). Believing in Jesus opens a person up to the life of Jesus flowing into them and giving them vitality.

3. Virtue: *My faith can be a virtue.*

Someone who remains faithful to what they believe is seen as a person of character; they are loyal, steadfast, and trustworthy. This is the sense we get in the parable about the master and servant, when the master says to the wise and hardworking servant, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master!” (Matt 25:21). We all desire not only to have faith but to be found faithful.

One of my first jobs in ministry was to work for camps for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I was a counselor, and I had about twelve or fourteen boys assigned to me; we would play basketball all day and I would lead a Bible study in the evenings. We would attend talks, typically evangelistic in nature, and often the speaker would culminate in what is called an altar call, where people could respond and go forward to give their life to Christ. Going forward in one of these signified a moment of *veritas*, saying, “I believe Jesus is who He says He is, I’m in.” One night, the speaker at camp was an NFL player. He said to the boys something to the effect, “by the grace of God I am a Christian; I know Jesus. I follow

Him as best I can faithfully every day. I made my decision 20+ years ago right here at this camp during an altar call.” Here is the picture: a line had been drawn in the sand at a moment in time, where this man believed this was true, *veritas*, and then he learned the life of a Christian and experienced a *vitality* that you could see through his faith. Over the years, at least up until this point, he had remained faithful.

So, faith is as complex of a part of our lives as it is an important part. And a particular type of faith is essential to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. What I think will prove helpful for us is to consider the biblical view of a disciples’ faith by considering the examples of two disciples: Peter and John. First, we’ll look at Peter, and through a few scenes in his life, we’ll see something about the anatomy of faith—what faith looks like if you could look at it at work inside a person. Second, we’ll turn briefly to John and see something about the practice of faith—how faith is not just a mental state or heart posture, but a habit, even a discipline we do.

I. Peter and the Anatomy of Faith

Our passage from Luke today finds Peter about to face great testing of his faith. The plot to betray and arrest Jesus is underway, and Jesus knows an hour of great trial is upon him and his disciples. He turns to Peter and says, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat,³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail....” (Luke 22:31-32a). Notice that in praying for Peter, Jesus prays for Peter’s faith. This is our window into the inner workings of Peter’s faith. Satan has asked to sift all the disciples (the “you” of vs. 31 is plural); but Jesus prays specifically for Peter’s faith. *Why?* Because Peter’s faith has, and will, play a big role in the life of all the disciples. I want to briefly consider three episodes in Peter’s life, this one, and two others and suggest that they tell us faith involves something of the mind, emotions, and heart—and all this in relation to Jesus.

1. Faith: *The Mind Chooses Jesus Alone* (John 6)

Peter stands out among the disciples as the first one to really see Jesus for who He is. While many wondered, *was Jesus a mistaken John the Baptist, was Jesus a great prophet*, Jesus addresses His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, and Peter speaks first: “Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matthew 16:15-16). Peter’s mind has come to see that Jesus is the Christ.

In a poignant scene in John 6, large crowds are following Jesus. Jesus performs the miracle of multiplying bread and fish. Jesus’ launches into a strong teaching, saying that “he is the bread of life”

and that people must come to him and eat him.” Many are bothered by this teaching and, as John records, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’” And “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (John 6:60, 66). We learn that many were only following Jesus because they “saw the signs he was doing on the sick” (John 6:2), or, as Jesus says, “because you ate your fill of the loaves” (John 6:26).

As thousands defect, Jesus looks at Peter and asks His disciples, “will you leave me too?,” to which Peter again shows unique faith: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). Here is the first insight about faith from Peter’s life: Peter sees clearly who Jesus is, and Peter chooses Jesus, rather than choosing his idea about Jesus. What the defecting crowds reveal is that many people put their faith in movements or miracles—in what the crowd is doing or what a powerful person is supposed to do for them. But true faith must be founded on this: belief in who Jesus is, and belief in what Jesus says—not, belief in Jesus plus something.

For Peter, faith begins as the mind sees Jesus and chooses Jesus alone—not Jesus plus something else. *What is our faith in?* If we could look through our faith as one looks through binoculars, what object would it be focused on? Jesus? Or are we believing in a movement? A culture? Some temporal dream Jesus will give us?

2. Faith: *The Emotions Hold onto Jesus* (Luke 22:31-34)

Next, we need to see that faith involves more than the intellect—but has a lot to do with emotions. We see this if we go back to our scene in Luke 22 when Satan wants to sift Peter. Peter has followed Jesus during Jesus’ teaching ministry, which involved some controversy. But now, Peter will have to follow Jesus through His trial and death. Jesus knows this will bring with it a new level of testing—and it’s so intense, that Satan is involved. Picking up at verse 31, Jesus says:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat,³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”³³ Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.

What's important to consider about this low point in Peter's faith is that it involves not just his head, but his heart. The events that transpired with Jesus' arrest, His trial, and the tumult surrounding them and the dawning realization that Jesus wasn't going to survive this trip to Jerusalem (at least not in any way Peter could have imagined)—these events would have thrown Peter's emotions into a tailspin.

Whether it's a sifting designed by Satan, or just the circumstances of a broken world and broken body, often the testing of faith is as much, if not more, emotional than it is intellectual. I've heard one pastor say, "doubt is never as intellectual as it masquerades itself to be."¹ Consider the book of Job. Satan wants to attack Job's faith, but he doesn't use intellectual arguments—he uses emotionally crippling events. Often when I've talked with a college student whose faith is dimming or seemingly gone, they may say it's because they learned something new in a philosophy course that's challenged their faith. But I often wonder if it doesn't have just as much to do with the new emotional setting—lots of people who don't believe, many new opportunities that would require departing from Jesus' ethical teachings.

This is the second thing Peter's faith teaches us: First, we say that faith must be in the object of Jesus Christ—not Jesus plus a bunch of my own agenda items. Second, we see that our faith involves our emotions—our faith is the handle our emotions hold onto. Another good question to ponder might be: *What could happen in my life that would threaten my faith in God? What event of suffering?*

Sifting strengthens

We are going to move to a third scene in Peter's life where we find that his faith has not ultimately failed. But before we do so I want to stress something positive about the sifting or testing of our faith. When our faith is tested like Peter's, there is a positive reason for it. It reveals what we actually believe, and in doing so, strengthens us. Notice that Jesus doesn't just pray that Peter will return, but He prays that Peter will then "strengthen the brothers" (Luke 22:32). Sometimes God allows things to unfold in our lives that feel like they are eroding the foundations. All the things we were subtly trusting in get blown away—and we wonder, *will I hold? When the faith in career, family, health, success goes, what's left of my faith?* We can feel like Peter.

When I was going through the ordination process to become a pastor, I was paired with a mentor named Simon Barnes, an ordained businessman from England in his mid-forties. At our first meeting he said to me, "Sam, I want you to know that I have no emotional investment in whether or not you become a pastor. I am here to see the Will of God done." While we met over the next several weeks, one of the

most important things that he told me as he talked about following Jesus over the long haul was, “there have been moments in my life where my faith was barely hanging on by a thread. But it was hanging on.” This paradigm was so important for me to hear; it let me know that if your faith feels so thin it is almost translucent, just pull up a chair next to Peter. Sometimes it feels that way. When people go through testing like this and find that there is a thread—if only a thread—of pure faith in Jesus—then this produces something so very sturdy in them. Once you know that if you have Jesus, you have what you need, you can bear a lot of tumult in other areas.

3. Faith: *The Heart Loves Jesus Because It’s Loved by Jesus* (John 21:15-19)

Peter doesn’t end up abandoning the faith, but to see why we need to trace down the answer to Jesus’ prayer in Luke 22:32. Jesus says to Peter, “Satan has demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, **but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail**” (22:32). There is a pivot here from Peter’s faithfulness to Christ, to Christ’s faithfulness to Peter. I want to take us on a journey to see how Jesus Himself answers this very prayer.

In the last chapter of John, John 21, we meet Peter after the resurrection of Jesus. Peter is out fishing. In the scene, Jesus has gone to Peter (much like when He first found Peter in Luke 5!), as He stands at the shore, here is what happens: As Peter is out fishing and Jesus calls to him from the shore. Peter eagerly swims to shore, the others coming behind. “When the disciples got to land,” John tells us, “they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out and bread.” Here, Peter is standing before the man he formerly denied. *What will Jesus say? Is He here to rebuke him?* Not at all. Let me read to you one of the most intimate passages in the Bible:

15 When they had finished [the bread and fish], Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” (John 21:15-17)

What has happened to Peter? Jesus pursued Peter’s heart until it melted. By asking Peter if Peter loves Him, Jesus is peeling away the scales of shame and doubt. And Peter, looking Christ in the eyes, realizes that the flame of love for Jesus has never fully gone out. And now, Peter is the rock upon which Jesus can build.

The Bible's most precious teaching about faith lies not in what it says about human faith—as important as that is. Rather, it's what the Bible says about God's faithfulness to keep His promises, God's faithfulness through Christ to His people. In a manner very mysterious to us, God's faithfulness is the foundation for our trust in Him. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:13, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."

Faith has a lot to do with what we love. We believe in what we want. Faith is grounded in the heart loving God because it's sensing how much God loves it. It is a bit of a mystery, how our faith matters, and yet it depends on God's faithfulness to us. But I think we see a window into this in the life of Peter. Peter's faith is not robotic; it really involves Peter's mind and will. But if we step back, we see how it depends on God from first to last.

Jesus came to find Peter early in his ministry, while Peter was out fishing. Jesus walked with Peter. And after Peter denied Jesus, Jesus later came and found Peter once again. Peter's faith flowed out of his love for Jesus, and Peter's love for Jesus was a response to Jesus' love for Peter. This is how Jesus is the foundation of our faith: His love is what starts us believing and what finally wins our hearts. From Peter's example, we can say that the experience of faith may feel like a rollercoaster, but it is always firmly fixed on the person of Jesus and rests ultimately on Jesus' love and faithfulness to us. A Christian writer in the 8th century, Paschasius Radbertus, said something that captures what we are getting at here:

Christ is held by the hand of hope. We hold him and are held. But it is a greater good that we are held by Christ than that we hold him. For we can hold him only so long as we are held by him.

II. John and the Habit of Faith

I want to close by turning from Peter to John, and the reason for this will be obvious in a moment. We love to think of Peter's heart being won back to Christ on that shoreline—as Jesus stood before him in person and asked him what he really loved. But for the rest of us, Jesus doesn't appear in person like this, and we struggle to feel much in our faith. This is why we must hold something John teaches us in one hand while we think of Peter's ecstatic experience.

The term for *faith* appears 98 times in the Gospel of John. But never once is it in the form of a noun—it is always in the form of a verb. For John, faith always involves more than just mental affirmation; for John, faith is an active movement towards Jesus. In John, “believing” (how the verb for faith is often translated) is synonymous with “coming” to Jesus, or “eating the bread” that is Jesus, “or “abiding” in Jesus. This means faith is not just a mental affirmation and it’s not just feelings: faith is also a habit, a practice.

The person of faith needs to keep showing up. Keep getting up and praying—even when your heart feels cold and circumstances bleak. Keep coming to church and worshiping with the people of God. Keep listening to faithful sermons and sharing with faithful saints. And keep doing this with the church. You do not have to bear the weight of the truthfulness of Christianity on your own shoulders—you are meant to practice faith among the people of faith. You don’t have to feel an overwhelming confidence or passion for Christ all the time—you are human and emotions ebb and flow. This is why John uses the verb—because faith is also a habit, a practice. The faithful disciple believes in Jesus, feels passion for Jesus, and keeps showing up with Jesus’ people.

Endnotes

1. This idea comes from a sermon preached by Rev. Timothy Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on February 20, 2000, Praying Our Doubts. Series “Psalms – The Songs of Jesus”. Scripture: Psalm 73:1-3; 12-26. It can be accessed at <https://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/praying-our-doubts/>