

## The Practice of Faith

The theory of faith is rather easy to understand. The “classroom” portion of the Christian faith...there’s nothing real “mysterious” or difficult about it. The simplicity of faith is summed up in the simple meaning to the First Commandment. “*You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? You should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*” That’s it. Faith in a nutshell. Trust in God above all things. But...you and I both know that this is much easier in theory than it is in “real life.” Putting the theory of faith into actual practice is a whole other ballgame.

“*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness....*” Did you catch that? I hope so. It wasn’t like it was encrypted or anything. It’s very blunt and to the point. **Put the first things first.** Seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Unfortunately, if we’re honest, we must admit that this is something that’s far easier said than done. The theory is far easier than actually having to put it into practice.

You know what, though? *It doesn’t have to be.* This is one of those things that’s so easy that not only can a child understand it, but a faithful child also quite easily put it into practice. It’s those of us who’ve been *tainted and jaded* by the fallen world we live in who hear these words of Jesus and say, “*Yeah, but you don’t understand. This is how the real world works. I do seek the kingdom of God. I look forward to that heavenly kingdom, but that’s not the reality right now. Right now I’m living in this world. Right now I have bills to pay and mouths to feed. The kingdom of God will come someday, and I’m seeking my way home to it every day, but right now I have real world things to worry about.*”

Folks: I don’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings here, but seeking the kingdom of God is not like getting on some theological yellow brick road and trekking your way to the magical land of Oz that we call heaven! You know what I mean...three steps forward, two steps back; maybe you fall down once in a while, but you keep on keeping on, and eventually you get there. That’s **NOT** what it means to seek the kingdom of God. You see, the original Greek word that Jesus uses here for “kingdom” does not refer to a *static, fixed place; a zip code; a place “somewhere out there.”* It’s not used here as a noun. That word—*basilion*—is best understood here as a verb. What Jesus is saying here is to *seek first the reign and rule of God.* Let me ask you: Does the reign and rule of God take place in our daily lives right here and now? Absolutely! In fact, as Paul speaks of in the very first chapter of Romans (1:19-20), the reign and rule of God is evidenced everywhere for all to see. Through the eyes and ears of the gift of saving faith, we are able to recognize

the *almighty and all-loving reign of God* in the simplest of things; *things such as Word and Sacrament and Absolution.*

The same thing goes here for that term “righteousness.” Remember: We are not only to seek first God’s reign and rule, but we are to *seek first His righteousness.* That word in the Greek—*dikaiasunā*—is also translated numerous times as “*justification.*” You remember what that word means, right? To be justified by God means to be *declared holy and forgiven...innocent.* Do you remember how we are justified? Not by our works, lest any one should boast! We are justified by faith alone in grace alone—God’s grace alone—which He grants to us because of the all-redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone.

Think about what Christ is saying here to His disciples. Remember the *context* of this conversation: This is still part of the Sermon on the Mount. This is Christ talking to faithful people who were truly struggling in their daily existence...far worse than we disciples struggle today. The world has always been a scary place, *especially for those who walk by faith.* Think about what Christ is saying to you this very day. **Put the first and most important things first.** Yes, this fallen and sinful world is tough, so tough, in fact, that at times it seems like we honestly don’t know how we’re going to make everything come together and work out. I can tell you: The cost of medical bills and student loans is enough to make you worry yourself right into a seizure! *Put the first things first. O you of little faith, where is your fear, love, and trust in God above all things?* If God takes care of birds and plants so wondrously, will He not provide you with everything you need...*you, the only work of His entire creation that He actually breathed life into?*

And that brings up a good question; a question you should constantly ask yourself: What do I really *need?* Believe it or not, but you don’t *need* food, clothing, money, or any other worldly thing, at least not when it comes to getting what really matters most—*eternal life and forgiveness and everlasting salvation.* Your 401K’s, your gardens and pantries, your walk-in closets, your weapons caches, being “Facebook famous,”...**NONE of it can save you.** That’s not to say that any of these things are bad or sinfully damning, but recognize the truth: *Not one of those things can make atonement for one single sin.* That really puts them all into perspective, doesn’t it? You show up to heaven with any one of those things in your hand and try to present them as reason why you “deserve” to enter into heaven, and you will be in for a rude awakening. **You will have put the wrong things first.** Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: You come into this world with nothing and you will leave with nothing...*nothing except that which you absolutely need*—saving faith alone in Christ alone, which is yours by God’s free grace alone.

In this way, I'll close out today's message, not by commanding you to simply drop the reins in your life and stop worrying about everything, *which would be a command to poor and unfaithful stewardship (that's NOT what Jesus was teaching here)*, but by pointing you and re-orienting you to the first and foremost things; the things that matter most and need to come first and foremost in the order of daily life: *the almighty and all-gracious reign and rule of God and His absolutely free, unmerited, and all-redeeming gift of justification*. Yes...the world seems like it's coming unglued all around us. If you're not concerned or worried about how things are going nowadays you must not have a pulse! Understand, too, that this command of Christ to put the first things first isn't just for when things go bad in life. This is to be our "*first things first*" reality all of the time.

Sports, hunting, leisure time, work...these are all secondary things in relation to salvation. How troubling it is when a ball game or a sleep-over or housework or the price of gas or vacation or any other thing in life takes precedence over Christ and His means of grace. *Keep all these things in proper order of importance*. Keep your eyes and ears of faith fixed firmly on Christ Jesus and His life-giving cross, Word, and Sacraments. Just look here [*the crucifix*]. Here is proper order and precedence. God so loved you that He sent His one and only begotten Son to die for you. God the Father put *you* over His own Son. Jesus Christ put *you* and your sin over Himself; over His own personal comfort and glory. *He put you first*. He *still* puts you first. "*You take and eat. You take and drink. This is My body and My blood, given and shed for you; for your forgiveness and your peace.*"

Folks: When you understand and believe this, the practice of faith isn't really all that hard, now is it? This is just what saving faith does. This is the practice of saving faith. Saving, repentant, thankful faith wants NOTHING more than to be where Christ is, giving out these gifts. Saving faith wants NOTHING more than to be in the presence of Christ. Saving faith wants NOTHING more than to seek these first things first. *These are the things that matter most*. This is where your Lord and Savior is actively and presently reigning and ruling. This is your life, your salvation...your justification. Saving faith just "gets it." Either you get it, or you don't.

May God bless you with this *saving "first-things-first" type of faith* all your remaining days and into all of eternity.

AMEN