

3. Believe what you hear.

² For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being *mixed with faith* in those who heard it.

Hebrews 4:2 (NKJV)

If we don't believe something, then we will simply not act on it. This is a truism that is often lost on people because of how "faith" is perceived. The teaching on what faith is over the past several decades has been so mangled that the idea that people have is more akin to wishful thinking than to confidence.

Faith is the confidence we have in something or someone on the basis of something we know about them. Consider, for example, that when we put our money in the bank, it is because we have reasonable confidence that the bank will act in keeping with the law regarding our trust and that the law will protect us from otherwise criminal behavior from the banks. That is what faith is.

The faith of Jesus Christ that we Christians have is exactly the same. We may never have seen God, and, for the vast majority of believers who have ever lived, we never saw Jesus either, but we know from the witness of creation, of death, and of our own conscience Who God is and what He is capable of. When we heard the Gospel, we didn't believe it because we wished that it was true. We believed it because it fit what we knew of God from considering creation, death, and our own conscience. We believed it because it was the perfect answer to these things.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is shown then in our own deliberate choice to cease from a path of antagonism toward God and to not try to appease Him with any inventions of our own, but rather to hold firmly to the sufficiency of the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is to say that it is impossible to have faith without showing in some tangible way that we do.

²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith *without deeds* is dead.

James 2:26 (NIV) (compare v.18)

¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore *speak*

2 Corinthians 4:13 (NIV)

⁴⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth *speaks* what the heart is full of.

Luke 6:45 (NIV)

As these passages above show, faith cannot exist without causing some action. We act according to what we truly believe, so if we don't believe the Truth, then we will not obey the Truth or act in any way in agreement with it.

Since, as we have seen already, spiritual growth is growth in faith, it is not possible to grow spiritually if we are not believing what we are being taught.

The Bible is a very large and complex book. Even if this generation is not the Laodicean one where the vast majority of believers have no love for the Truth, even if this were the best of times, this wealth and complexity presents a real test for our hearts. There is much that we can be taught from the Bible that would be hard for us to believe ordinarily, simply because it is not commonly known or accepted. But it is good to keep in mind that there are depths to the Word of Truth that are kept only for those who love the Truth enough to seek it out, that there are secrets in the Truth meant only for those who want to know it, such secrets that even when it is spoken to those who care nothing for it will, at best, mean nothing to them (Matthew 13:14; Isaiah 28:11-13), and, at worst, annoy them when they hear them (Luke 20:19, cf. 1 Corinthians 2:8).

⁹ However, as it is written:

“What *no eye* has seen,
what *no ear* has heard,
and what *no human mind* has conceived”—
the things God has prepared for *those who love him*—

¹⁰ these are the things God has *revealed to us* by his Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ They must keep hold of the *deep truths* of the faith with a clear conscience.

1 Timothy 3:9 (NIV)

³ ‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you *great and unsearchable things* you do not know.’

Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV)

The truths of God are far higher than human thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). God's ways far transcend our awkward human ways. Therefore it should not surprise us as it did Nicodemus (John 3:9-12) that the truths of the Scriptures sound strange to us when we hear them. Their seeming strangeness does not make them untrue. Therefore, we must not judge a teaching just on the strangeness of it or the lack thereof, but rather on its faithfulness to what we actually see in the Bible when we read it.

This is not at all to say that there are no outlandish things taught by all kinds of people as deep truths of the Bible. The Bible does acknowledge something it calls the “deep things of Satan” (Revelation 2:24), but these things have nothing to do with the Scriptures:

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “*wisdom*” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the *wisdom that comes from heaven* is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

James 3:13-17 (NIV)

James is very clear about what the difference is between the wisdom of God and the “wisdom” of Satan. The focus of the so-called wisdom or deep things/”truths”/secrets of Satan will always be found to be on this world and there will be envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and all sorts of evil practice in it. In other words, there will be nothing of it that is concerned with the love of God and with the love of the Church. The wisdom of God, on the other hand, is distinct in its purity, its lack of this world’s taint (John 14:30; James 1:27; 1 John 2:15). It is also evidenced in a love of peace with God and sharing this peace with others, as far as they will let us (Hebrews 12:14-17). It shows itself in our accommodation of one another in our weakness and our refusal to compete with each other (Romans 15:1-6; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13; Galatians 6:1-3), but rather to esteem one another above our own selves (John 13:14; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-4; 1 Peter 5:5). This is how the wisdom of God works. So, the strangeness of a teaching is not what matters, but what it encourages us to believe and obey does. Therefore, we must make every effort to believe the things we are taught by pastor-teachers whom we have tested and proved to be reliable, so that we will become fruitful in the Truth.

4. Apply what you have learned.

²² But *be doers of the word*, and *not hearers only*, deceiving *yourselves*. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately *forgets* what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a *forgetful hearer* but a *doer of the work*, this one will be *blessed* in what he does.

James 1:22-25 (NKJV)

²⁴ “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and *does them*, I will liken him to a *wise man* who built his house on *the rock*: ²⁵ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not *fall*, for it was founded on the rock.

²⁶ “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and **does not do them**, will be like a **foolish man** who built his house on **the sand**: ²⁷ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it **fell**. And great was its **fall**.”

Matthew 7:24-27 (NKJV)

Granted that the second passage applies more completely to unbelievers who reject the Gospel, the lesson that we are being taught from both passages above is that there is no point in listening to the truth taught to us if we are not going to do what we are taught. The truth only benefits us if we actually obey it. We have already seen this to some extent in our discussion on believing what we are taught. There it was mentioned that we only act on what we truly believe. Here, however, we are told that we cannot claim to believe just because we heard and perhaps made mental assent to what we heard. That we believe anything is proved in our actions. If we act according to what we have heard, then that is proof that we do believe what we have been taught. James puts it like this:

¹⁴ What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷ Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰ But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ²² Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ²³ And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

²⁶ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

James 2:14-26 (NKJV)

That is to say, we cannot claim to have any meaningful faith if we are not doing anything that lines up with what we claim to believe. James notably uses the same example that Paul uses in Romans 4. Although one might think that the two were opposing or contradicting each other, we see that they really are not. Whereas Paul was concerned with the business of trying to commend ourselves to God on our own

conception of righteousness, James is concerned with what faith in God really means. The two positions are two sides of the same coin. Paul teaches us that it isn't anything we do that God cares about. We can never meet God's standard of righteousness just by setting our own standards and trying to attain to them. We are taught that it is faith in Him that God considers righteous, that is, faith is what God's standard is. James then explains that this faith is not mere mental assent or ordinary knowledge of reality. Rather, it is embracing the truth for what it is, a true dependence on God, a trust in Him that gives us the confidence to do what He says. So, because Abraham believed God, He sacrificed Isaac. He trusted God to keep His word to him that he would have numerous descendants through Isaac (Genesis 15:1-6; 21:12), even if the Lord was commanding that he sacrifice the boy as a burnt offering. Paul says this very thing too in Hebrews 11:17-19. That is to say that true faith never exists alone. Its existence is proved by the works that it makes possible. Those who believe *do*.

As we learn the truth from our pastor-teachers, we will often be tempted by the difficulty of obedience to not bother with obeying what we learn, but we should not yield to that temptation. We would be wise to commit ourselves to obedience in everything that we learn. As we ought to see from James 1:24-25, those who do not obey what they are taught forget the very truths that they have taken the trouble to learn. We are wise if we take pains to obey what we hear that we can see upheld by the Bible that we read. This is the only way to grow spiritually and please the Lord.

Note also that James calls disobedience to the truth that we learn "deceiving yourselves." This is no small charge. Mental assent to the truth that we hear makes us feel that we are accomplishing something of value, but because we do not commit to this truth with active obedience, there is no actual growth in faith or any true spiritual accomplishment. We are merely deceiving our own selves then.

Although it should be obvious what application of the truth means, we will take a little time now to understand it a bit better. Applying the truth really just means using the truth that we have learned to make our daily practical decisions. We are always faced with choices in our daily lives from the mundane (e.g. what to eat or drink and how much) to the arcane (e.g. what career to pursue or whether to move to a new city or country or even who to marry). There are godly decisions and ungodly ones. There are godly ways to make decisions and ungodly ones. Why we choose one thing rather than another exposes what our true hearts are, and it is our hearts that God looks upon.

We are not speaking of decisions that are clear. For example, "should we engage in sexual immorality or not?" is not a serious question for believers. The Scriptures are clear that we should avoid all such things. Things that are this obvious are only questions of obedience, not of understanding the Lord's Will. There are other things that are not prescribed or proscribed in the bible. Whether to marry Person A or Person B is not something that the Bible is explicit about, for example. However, the better we understand the Bible's teachings, the better we can tell whether either option is in keeping with what God wants for us. In order to apply the truth, we find

that we must think hard about what it means and therefore how it can be used in our individual experiences. This intimate engagement with it is actually what changes us. This is why it is so important that we make a point of duty to use the truths that we learn. If we don't, we do not grow spiritually or obey God. It is by using the truths that we learn that we make them our own.

This should make immediately clear to us that application of the truth is a highly individual affair. That does not mean that the truth can change or that it can mean different things to different people. It does not at all. It only means that the unchanging truth can be used in several equally legitimate ways by different people in different circumstances. Again, we must remember that there are wrong ways to use or apply the truths that we learn, so we must not assume that the fact that our individuality is allowed to come into play here means that we may use the truth however we please and never have to worry about being wrong. No one thinks that using the back of a spoon to scoop up food is the proper way to use a spoon, although we may certainly use a spoon to eat different types of food that can be scooped. Each of us is different and our circumstances are different, so the truth can be brought to bear on our situations in many legitimate ways, but figuring out which way is right for us is a real responsibility. It is not to be taken lightly or thought of as a waste of time.

⁵ One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Romans 14:5-9 (NKJV)

Because application of the truth is our opportunity to demonstrate our true heart attitude to the Lord, no one can really tell us how to apply the truth in our unique life situations. So, looking to our pastor-teachers to answer questions of application is often going to be disappointing for us. Our pastor-teachers have a job to explain the Scriptures to us, so that we can understand the principles or truths of the Lord, so that we can have the building-blocks, so to speak, for the arguments that we must build for the choices that we make. These choices will always be uniquely ours, as we see in the passage immediately above. We are responsible to make them for the Lord, and we are the only ones competent to make them. A pastor-teacher who wishes to help us form a general idea of what a legitimate application of the truth can be could offer us his own example of how the truth was brought to bear in his own life decisions, but in the end, we will be responsible to make the right decision for our own selves, and our applications may not look very like the ones that our pastor-teachers made in their

own unique experiences. In fact, this is one way that we can tell a true pastor-teaching ministry from a cult. In a cult, the leader demands uniformity of behavior in all sorts of things. Rules are made and followers must obey them. A pastor-teacher is responsible rather to make sure that the truths of the Scripture are accessible to those who would listen to him, but the listener is the one who must decide how to use the truths that they have accessed with the help of the pastor-teacher. This freedom of action for listeners is an important mark of a true and well-prepared pastor-teacher.

It bears repeating at this point that this exercise of figuring out the right way to use the truth in our individual situations is how we grow spiritually, become mature believers, and also advance in that maturity. The more we are using the truths that we are learning, the more we are thinking about the truths that we are learning in a serious way in order to figure out how we can apply them to please the Lord, the more our own way of thinking is transformed to become like the Lord's way of thinking.

² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:2 (NKJV)

²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:23-24 (NKJV)

¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. ¹⁶ For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:15-16 (NKJV)