

IS FAITH A CHOICE OR A GIFT?

Scriptures: John 15:1-11, 12-17

Here is this week's question of faith submitted last month on a bulletin insert: "Can we choose to have faith or is faith a gift of the Holy Spirit?" Is faith a choice or a gift? The answer is yes. Let us pray.

This could have been the shortest sermon ever, but the question probably deserves more than a flip answer. So let's start by looking at the scriptures on the back of the bulletin. The first one is Moses speaking to the people of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.

In this scripture Moses calls the people of Israel to make a choice—to decide to follow God.

Now look at the next scripture which is also spoken by Moses in the same book of Deuteronomy. Moses says, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession." Did the Israelites choose God or did God choose them? The answer is yes.

Look at the next two examples. Joshua 24:15 is a scripture we read in our church last week. Joshua says to the people of Israel:

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Last week in the sermon I said that faith is not something you prove; it is something you decide. It is a choice.

But look at the next scripture: Isaiah 44:1-2. Isaiah says,

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you; Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen."

Did Israel choose God or did God choose Israel? The answer is yes.

The last two verses come from Jesus himself. Early in John 15 Jesus says to the disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." That is a summons for you to make a choice—to commit yourself to an on-going relationship with Jesus.

Then just a few verses later Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” How can faith be a choice and a gift? Isn’t that a contradiction?

Not really. It is like falling in love. In his book *Blue Like Jazz* Donald Miller writes, “Love is both something that happens to you *and* something you decide upon.” I did not start college planning to get married before I went to seminary. It actually turned out to be a good idea, because my wife got a job and essentially put me through school, but I did not plan it that way. To tell the truth I fell in love. It was something that “happened” to me. Of course, when we became engaged, we both made a decision. No one held a gun to our heads, not even the proverbial shotgun. I made a free decision to marry my wife. But looking back on it I could not imagine doing anything else. I could not imagine choosing any other life. So if you asked whether my marriage was a choice or a gift, I would say yes.

The same thing is true of faith. On the same question of faith insert the writer asked, “How can we resolve the apparent tension between the sovereignty of God and the exercise of human free will?” First we must realize that both are true. The Bible verses on the back of the bulletin make that clear. Faith is both a choice and a gift, and the key to the Christian life is to realize the implications of both being true.

In the rest of this sermon I will spell out four implications of the fact that faith is both a choice and a gift:

- 1) Because faith is a choice, you are responsible. You are responsible for your relationship to God. You cannot blame your upbringing. You cannot blame your past experiences with hypocritical Christians or mean-spirited parents or lousy pastors. You may have had past bad experiences with Christians in the past, but that does not excuse you from a relationship with Jesus. You have a choice, and you are responsible for that choice.
- 2) Because faith is a gift, you cannot brag about it. You cannot look down on those who don’t have one. Being a follower of Jesus does not mean you are better than other people. You were chosen by God before you had done anything to deserve it. That is what predestination means. Remember that before you look down on anyone else.
- 3) Because faith is a choice, you must maintain your commitment to it. People may fall in love, but marriage takes work. Your commitment to your husband or wife is renewed in countless decisions that you make every single day. The same is true for a relationship with God. When Jesus said, “Abide in me,” he meant that discipleship is not a one-time decision; it is an on-going commitment. Your commitment to Jesus is renewed in countless decisions that you make every single day.
- 4) Because faith is a gift, the only proper response is gratitude. Since you cannot brag about your faith, you can only be grateful for it. The best antidote for depression is gratitude. The best antidote for resentment or bitterness is gratitude. The best antidote for greed or jealousy is gratitude. And the key to gratitude is to realize that you have already been given the best gift anyone could have: an eternal life of righteousness, joy, and peace in God’s kingdom.

Do you see how this works? Then tension between choice and gift is essential to the Christian life. If you forget that faith is a choice, you become complacent. If you forget that faith is a gift, you become fearful. If you forget that faith is a choice, you remain stuck in your past. If you forget that faith is a gift, you end up trying to earn God's blessing instead of thanking God for it.

For several years while my children were in high school I participated in Ham on Regal, the parents show at Ferris High School. It was an extraordinary effort just to get 200 people on and off stage, let alone expecting them to memorize their lines, learn the songs, and not trip over each other doing the dance steps. I particularly remember one rehearsal about two weeks before the show opened. The director got up in front of all 200 of us and said, "For all of you first-timers in Ham on Regal, I have message: Don't worry. I know that the show looks like chaos right now, and you're thinking, 'This is never going to work.' All I can say is don't worry. It looks this way every year. It will come together, just hang in there." That was his message for all the first-timers.

Then he said, "I've now got a message for all you Ham on Regal veterans. You people need to start worrying. You're getting lazy. You're getting complacent. If you don't start paying attention, this show will never come together."

It was a perfect illustration of how the Bible works. The Bible says, "Don't worry," and it also says, "Don't get complacent." It says that faith is a gift, and it also says that faith is a responsibility. The key to the Christian life is to remember that both are true.

- Ken Onstot
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