

What Is Faith?  
Matthew 8:23-34

Salvation comes by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The rediscovery of these great truths, taught by the Scriptures and by the early Church Fathers through the days of Augustine, sparked one of the greatest revivals the world has ever seen – the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's. The same truths were taught by the evangelists of the First and Second Great Awakenings, which swept the United States from the 1730's through the 1860's, prompting the organization of thousands of congregations and the building of sanctuaries like this one.

But what does it really mean to have faith in Christ? Is it sufficient simply to acknowledge the facts of the gospel story – the Virgin Birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection? Is it sufficient to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, the divine Son of God? In other words, is faith simply mental assent to the historical truth about Jesus?

If so, then wouldn't the demons have faith in Christ? After all, they do seem to have a lot more knowledge about Jesus than anyone else in this passage. In verse 26 when Jesus spoke a word of power, stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples asked one another "What manner of man is this?" But when Jesus speaks a word of power to the demons, they know very well Who He is – The Son of God. And they cringe before His authority – they have no doubt that He can banish them to the abyss with but a word.

But they go further. They believe so strongly in Jesus' identity, they believe so strongly in His authority that they are willing to ask Him to do something for them – to let them possess that herd of pigs. This is a straightforward request, and they have no doubt that Jesus will be able to do what they ask. And it is, in fact, a request that Jesus grants.

So, can we say that these demons have faith in Christ? They certainly acknowledge so much of what we affirm to be true in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. They acknowledge that Jesus Christ is a real person, and that He is the Son of God. When we recite the Creeds, we say we are professing our faith. So is that all there is to it?

Of course, we often exercise our faith by asking God for things that we want, thus recognizing His power and authority to give them to us. But once again, we have seen that the demons do that as well. So, if mental assent to the true identity of Jesus and to the power and authority of God is all there is to faith, then the demons have faith. And that just can't be right.

Okay, so how do we know that the demons don't have saving faith? Well, just look at what they ask for. They ask for something destructive, something that expresses the very essence of the demonic. Because Satan is a murderer so are the demons. So, if they can't go on destroying

the men they have possessed, they say they would be satisfied with destroying a herd of pigs. Because they are rebels against the Most High God, demons are happy to do anything that will bring harm to any part of God's creation.

And so we see the problem with the demons: while they are right about Jesus' identity and while they acknowledge His authority, they refuse to bow the knee to Him. Just so, mere intellectual assent to the truth about Jesus without submission, belief in His power without repentance, belief in His authority without turning away from the self and its desires, without turning toward God and embracing His will – such belief is not saving faith.

Now, I know none of us are open rebels against God in the way that these demons are. But do we sometimes define faith in demonic terms? Have we been content merely to believe things about Jesus instead of knowing Him and walking in His ways? Have we been satisfied merely with doctrinal orthodoxy, all the while continuing to tolerate the existence of sin in our lives? Have we been content to mouth the words of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed all the while neglecting God's will and living according to our own desires?

If that's our idea of faith, if we think we can simply believe the correct things about Jesus without repenting of our sins, then we believe in Jesus the same way demons do. If that's our idea of faith, we can expect no salvation. Saving faith must mean something more.

So, what about the Gadarene crowd? Did they have faith in Jesus? No, they didn't have as clear an understanding of Jesus' divine identity as the demons did. But they also came to believe in His power, didn't they? After all, they heard the story of the miraculous exorcism from eyewitnesses. And then they came and saw the undeniable proof – the absence of the pigs and the presence of the demoniacs clothed and in their right mind. No, like the demons, they had no doubt that Jesus possesses tremendous power.

And, also like the demons, they made a request for Jesus that He granted. Even though He and the disciples had just arrived, at the crowd's urging He gets back in the boat in the first verse of chapter 9 and gets ready to return across the lake.

So, even though they might not have understood Jesus' identity, the Gadarene crowd believed in Jesus' power. Just like the demons, they asked Jesus to do something for them, a wish that He fulfilled. So, does that mean the crowd had faith?

Well, just as we did with the demons, let's test their faith by looking at what they ask for. Remember, the demons' request displayed their defiant refusal to repent. Just so, the crowd's request also demonstrates how far they are from true faith. For even though they encountered and even acknowledged the power of Christ, they drew back from Him. They asked Jesus to go away from them.

So, if the demons lacked repentance and submission, the crowd lacked trust. When confronted with a power that was strange and new, a power that was greater than anything they had ever known, they recoiled in fear. Moreover, when the power of God threatened their livelihood through the destruction of their property, they were even more determined to have nothing to do with Jesus.

And so once again we see that the problem with the crowd is not their lack of belief in Jesus' power. The problem with the crowd is their lack of trust in the way Jesus chooses to use His power. And any sort of belief without trust, belief without confidence, belief without opening up the self and abandoning its desires in order to submit to God and His will – such belief can in no way be considered true, saving faith.

And so we need to ask ourselves: have we, in our own lives, defined faith the way the crowd did? Oh, we may not have been openly rebellious the way the demons were. But like the Gadarene crowd, has our faith been more self-centered than God-centered? Do we allow our calculations of personal interest to put distance between us and God? When circumstances come into our lives that don't fit in with our own plans, do we retain confidence in God? Or in the face of grief and disappointments, do we doubt His power and love, giving in instead to worry or discouragement, to fear or despair? When life gets tough, is the weakness of our faith in Christ revealed?

At first glance, that certainly seems to have been true for the disciples in the boat with Jesus, doesn't it? Oh, make no mistake – they had seen many more displays of Jesus' power than the Gadarene crowd had. Just in the course of this chapter, they had seen Jesus heal a man of the incurable disease of leprosy. They had witnessed Jesus healing the centurion's servant by simply speaking a word of command, without going anywhere near him. They had seen Jesus heal Peter's mother-in-law with a simple touch, and they had witnessed Him casting out demons and healing the sicknesses of everyone who had come into Peter's house in Capernaum.

Yes, like the crowd, they had seen many proofs of Jesus' sovereign power. But when that great storm arose on the Sea of Galilee, when their boat began to be swamped by the waves, even the experienced fishermen among them fell into despair. As they woke Jesus up from His nap, they just knew they were going to perish, they were going to die. At that point it didn't look like they had any more faith than the Gadarene crowd ended up having.

And even after Jesus performed His miracle of calming the winds and waves with a word, they still didn't have the level of knowledge the demons had about Jesus. They didn't bow before Him, acknowledging Him as the Son of God, or even confessing that He was the Lord's Messiah.

Instead, they were filled with confusion. They said, “What manner of man is this?” So, how can we possibly say they had any kind of faith at all?

And maybe that’s where you find yourself today. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the pressures of life. Maybe all this political turmoil, and this months-long struggle with a mysterious virus has you exhausted. Maybe you feel like your boat is sinking, and maybe you have even begun to wonder if Jesus cares enough to bail you out. Maybe you don’t feel like you have any faith at all.

But remember – how did we determine that the demons and the Gadarene crowd did not in fact have faith? It wasn’t what they knew or didn’t know about Jesus’ identity or His authority or His power – it was what they asked for. In the face of Jesus’ authority, the demons rejected Jesus, asking instead to be allowed to continue their mission of destruction. In the face of Jesus’ power, the Gadarene crowd also rejected Jesus, asking Him to leave them so they could continue living the way they wanted to.

Okay, so in spite of all their confusion, and in spite of all their fears, what did the disciples ask Jesus? Simply this: “Lord, save us.” No, they may not have had very much knowledge about Jesus. And they may not even have had much hope that He would be able to answer their prayer. But unlike the demons and the Gadarene crowd, they turned what little faith they had in the right direction. They went toward Jesus instead of pulling away from Him in hate or fear. And just as Jesus did with the demons and the Gadarene crowd, Jesus gave the disciples what they wanted. He saved them from the winds and the waves, even though they didn’t understand very much about His Person or Work at that time.

And that’s the good news for us today. The good news is that it doesn’t matter what is going on in the world. It doesn’t matter what’s going on in your life. It doesn’t matter if you’re feeling confident and assured, or if you’re wondering if you’re even going to be able to take the next step. The good news is that Jesus is willing and able to save you not only in the midst of the difficult circumstances of this life, not only from all your fear and discouragement, and not only from all your grief and despair, but from all your sins and failures, from all the things and habits and relationships that have pulled you away from His light and His truth and His love.

And just as Paul taught, and just as Augustine taught, and just as Luther and Calvin taught, and just as Edwards and Whitefield taught, and just as all the pastors have taught this congregation from 1807 until today, there’s not a thing you have to do for Jesus to save you. Just trust Him to do for you what you can’t do for yourself. For the One Who answered those fearful, confused disciples’ simple prayer, “Lord, save us,” well, He still answers the same sorts of prayers from those who will simply turn to Him. For when it comes right down to it, that’s all faith really is. Will you trust Him today?