

“True and False Faith”
John 4:43-54
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Text Comment

- v.45 The impression that is given often in the Gospels is that the Lord’s reputation spread like wildfire throughout Judea and Galilee.
- v.46 “Royal Official” probably refers to someone who was in the service of Herod Antipas, the Roman’s client king of the region that included Galilee.
- v.48 The Lord was speaking to the official, but he spoke in the plural, addressing the Galileans in general. The NIV’s “you people” is a way of expressing the plural “you.”
- v.49 The father was desperate. He wasn’t interested in the spiritual condition of Galilee, he was fearful for his son’s life.
- The “come down” is an incidental illustration of John’s accuracy. One goes *down* from Cana to Capernaum some 1,500 feet in elevation.
- v.50 Jesus’ reply is surprising. The father expected he would have to go to his son’s bedside. He gave the man no sign, at least not at first. He gave him only his word, but that was enough for this man. He took Jesus at his word and turned for home.
- v.53 The result of the first miracle, if you remember, had been a deepening faith on the part of his disciples. Here, again, this man and his family believed because of the healing and the timing of it, still more proof that Christ had done it, even though he was not present at the bedside. Here “believe” is used in the sense of becoming a Christian, a follower of Christ, a stronger use of the word than, say, in v. 50 where the text reads literally, “the man believed the word that Jesus had said to him...”
- v.54 That is, it was not the second miracle he had performed. We read in 2:23 and 3:2 that the Lord had done a number of miracles in Judea. This is the second he performed in Galilee and the second that John is recording in some detail.

Now, there are not that many different major themes in the Gospel of John. There are a certain number and John returns to them again and again. If a preacher is to be faithful to the Gospel he is preaching, he must repeat himself, because John did in his Gospel. We will find, for example, a number of different individuals bear their own witness to the fact that they had discovered that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior. So far we have heard this testimony from John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, and other Samaritans from her town. We will be given seven accounts of miracles that the Lord performed that demonstrate his credentials as the one who has been sent from heaven. And we will see throughout the Gospel people both believe in Jesus and refuse to believe in him, both receive and reject him. The Gospel, you remember, began with the

statement that when Jesus came down from heaven to his own people (the Jews) they did not, as a rule, receive him, though some did.

And, there is another theme. In chapter 2, we have already encountered the phenomenon of a superficial and insincere faith on the part of the Jews who were mesmerized by the Lord's mighty works but who had no interest in his real mission as the Savior of sinners. Jesus knew very well that the enthusiasm they showed for him was due to his miracles and not to any true and sincere acceptance of him as their Lord and Savior.

The account of the Lord's "second sign", the healing of the official's son, is a study in this contrast between true and false faith. It elaborates the very brief mention of this subject at the end of chapter 2. We got an indication of the problem of false faith at the end of chapter 2; now the matter is expanded in John's account of this incident in Galilee. It is characteristic of John's Gospel that themes are introduced in a cursory way early on and then elaborated in greater detail subsequently. We had, for example, a brief mention of the supernatural birth by which those who were saved came to believe in Jesus in the introduction to the Gospel, in 1:13. We got a much more elaborate account of that spiritual birth, that rebirth to faith and eternal life in the Lord's discourse with Nicodemus in chapter 3. Well so with the contrast between true and false faith in chapter 2. Mentioned there, elaborated in chapter 4 and, so we will find, again in still greater detail, later in the Gospel.

The Lord continued his interrupted journey northward to Galilee. In Samaria, of all places, the Lord had been received joyfully by a large number of people. They had believed in him as the Messiah and the Savior. But now he came back into the territory of his own people the Jews. And the point is made explicitly at the beginning of the section, there in v. 44. "Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country." Unlike the Samaritans, the response to him among his own people was, at best, ambiguous. [Carson, 236]

So, when we read in v. 45 that the Galileans "welcomed him" we are already thinking that this welcome, like the enthusiasm of the Jews for him when he was still south, in Judea, was something the Lord would not take too seriously. He knew what was in a man and he didn't entrust himself to them. That is what we read at the end of chapter 2 and that is what we find here again at the end of chapter 4. As verse 45 goes on to explain, the enthusiasm for Jesus in Galilee was the result of these folk who had seen his miracles in Judea. It was superficial only. There is irony in that statement, "the Galileans welcomed him."

And, if we had any doubt about that, the Lord himself dispels it with his first response to the official who had come to him for help for his son. The man came seeking help for his dying son. But the Lord detected in the man's plea, however sincere, an interest in a cure, even a belief that Jesus, the famous miracle-worker, could effect a cure, but no real, personal interest in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior. The man just wanted Jesus to cure his son, he wasn't interested in larger questions and he certainly wasn't thinking about surrendering his life to Jesus.

The Lord's reply was curt and amounted to a rebuke. But, it was addressed not only to the man himself but to all the Galileans. These people were interested in him for his miracles not for his

mission in the world. They thought of him as a magician, not as the Son of God. Later on in the Gospel, even after one of his greatest miracles, the feeding of the 5,000, when men were forced to choose between true faith in Christ as the Savior and their old religious views, they abandoned Jesus, his miracles notwithstanding. They were glad for the miracles, they wanted the miracles, *but not if it meant confessing Jesus as Lord!* John makes clear throughout the Gospel that even miracles cannot produce a living faith. Such is the blindness of the human heart in sin. Judas saw the Lord's miracles; good grief, he even performed miracles himself in the Lord's name, but he did not have a living faith in Christ.

So, when Jesus said here that the Galileans wouldn't believe unless they saw miracles he meant not that miracles would produce a sincere and living faith in them, but that the only faith in Jesus they would have would be the superficial faith that is produced by enthusiasm over his miracles. And it is right for us to speak of even this superficial enthusiasm as a kind of faith, for John speaks of it that way. Both here and in 2:23, he speaks of the Jews *believing* in the Lord's name, but he clearly does not regard that faith as genuine. That, you see is precisely the problem. It is not a distinction between no faith and faith that bedevils us and the church of God. We know the difference between an atheist and a Christian or a Muslim and a Christian or a Buddhist and a Christian. The problem is that many who call themselves Christians and are regarded as Christians have a faith that is inauthentic, insincere, unreal. It poses as faith, but it is not true and living faith. And that has been the great problem of Christianity in the world ever since, as it was the problem in Israel in the former epoch.

Now, the man himself was not interested in these questions, he simply wanted healing for his son. He believed that Jesus could grant his request. And so, when the Lord gave him his word but no miracle – at least not immediately – , the man took Jesus at his word and went home. By this step of believing the Lord's *word* he showed that he was not like the rest of the Galileans, simply interested in signs and wonders. And the trust he put in Jesus, confirmed subsequently by the healing of his son at that exact hour, then produced a true confidence in Jesus Christ, now not only the healer, but the Savior. And, as so often in the Bible, not the man only, but his household with him.

Now, you can see the movement of John's thought in the entire fourth chapter. We now see the importance of the episode in Samaria. It sets up a contrast with the response of the Jews in Galilee. The Samaritans saw Jesus for what he was and received him joyfully as the Messiah, the Savior of the world! Their having received him made all the more tragic and inexcusable Israel's failure to receive her Messiah when he came among her. Despised Samaritans believed in him, but his own people, the covenant community, either actively opposed him or refused to be interested in him beyond a fascination for miracles and, later, for politics. [Carson, 237] He may have been popular in Samaria, but in his own homeland, public sentiment was decidedly against him, even if, at first, it was superficially for him. This story of his rejection by his people will continue through the Gospels and then throughout the Book of Acts. It is a large part of the history of the New Testament.

On the other hand, among the Jews were some who saw clearly that the miracles were only important for what they revealed about the true nature and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. And

they believed in him and became his followers. They believed his word, not only his miracles. They believed *in him* not only in the amazing things he did.

Now, what are we to do with this piece of history? Well, we are to take as seriously as our Savior did the contrast between true and false faith, the reality of false and insincere faith, the penchant that people in the church have for misleading themselves as to their relationship with God.

I confess that I preached this subject too often and too emphatically years ago, when I was first the minister of this church. Young ministers often make this mistake. They want to be faithful ministers. They consult the Bible as to what faithfulness in a minister amounts to and they learn that, at least very often, in biblical history, faithfulness in a minister amounted to warning people that the fact that they thought themselves saved was no proof that they were, and true faith in Christ had evidences and that if those evidences were lacking, no matter how long someone had been a member of the church, professing faith in Christ was mere whistling in the dark. People don't like to hear that message too often and so it can seem to be the truest mark of a minister's faithfulness to his message that he continue to preach it even though people don't want to hear it. And one can fall out of balance with a one-sided emphasis on warning against an insincere profession of faith in Christ and on the necessity of making one's calling and election sure. I think I did in those earlier years.

Our very first elder-visitation of the congregation, back in Autumn of 1979 concerned this question. We asked the members of our little congregation whether they were sure that they were Christians, whether they *knew* that they had eternal life, and *why* they were sure. And we discovered that everyone was sure he or she had eternal life – including some folk concerning whom we had very serious doubts – but that only some of them could give a convincing account of their reasons for this confidence that they had in their possession the salvation of Christ. They had the understanding of what true, living faith in Jesus Christ amounted to, or what distinguished it from its imitation.

And, so, on and on I preached about false faith. Too much; too often.

Still, you don't have to read very far in the Bible before you come across this subject. It is the primary theme of the OT prophets. Their ministry was to a congregation that was circumcised but uncircumcised, as Jeremiah put it. They had the outward rite but were lacking the inner reality signified by the rite. They looked forward to the Day of the Lord, were always talking about, when the Lord would draw near to deliver them. And Amos and others had to disabuse them. The Day of the Lord, the prophets said, isn't going to be a good day for you, but a bad day, a terrible day. When the Lord comes it won't be to deliver you but to judge and punish you, because, notwithstanding all your protestations of faith in the Lord, you haven't been faithful to him.

And the Lord began his ministry on the same note. Over and over again throughout the gospels we hear him saying this same thing to the Jews – and remember, the Jews were just the church of that particular day and time. “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, did we not drive out demons in your name’, and I will say to them, ‘Depart from me, I never knew you.’” Or, on another occasion, “Many will come from the East and the West and will take their places at the

feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness.” This was the theme of some of his last public teaching. He spoke of the wise and foolish virgins and how the foolish virgins, though they had the oil and went out as well to welcome the bridegroom – here is that word “welcome” again – nevertheless were not allowed into the banquet. He spoke of the invitation to the feast that so many refused. He spoke again and again about the hypocrisy of the Jews, about how their faith was all posture and not a true and sincere trust in the grace and mercy of God. This is a very large part of the teaching of our Lord as it has been preserved in the four gospels, this distinction between true and false faith. He shows us and contrasts for us a Pharisee and a tax collector, a prodigal son and a dutiful son, a rich man and a poor beggar, a wealthy Pharisee and a forgiven prostitute, and in every case it is the person in the despised, the lowly, the condemned position who simply acknowledges his need and cries out for mercy who has the Lord’s approval and is set before us as the true believer.

And, of course, events would prove the Lord right. It was the religious folk, the upright, the respectable, the religious folk, who finally, in a frenzy of what they saw as true religious zeal, murdered the Messiah.

And when we come into the rest of the NT the story is the same. There is always a concern for false faith, always a recognition that the easiest thing in all the world is to think oneself a Christian when one is not, to think oneself at peace with God when one is not. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith,” Paul writes. And, again, “Let the one who thinks he is standing take heed lest he fall.”

And how do we know? What made the difference between these Galileans, who seemed so interested in the Lord but were not really, and this father who plead for the life of his son and became, along the way, a believer in Jesus Christ?

Well was it not just that desperation? The rich young ruler went away from the Lord because he had great wealth and he didn’t want to part with it. He wasn’t desperate enough. The sinful woman wet the Lord’s feet with her tears because she had been lost and the Lord had found her. She was desperate. The Samaritan woman’s story was the same. She loved much because she had been forgiven much. And here was a man who loved his son and was terrified that he would die. And he came to the Lord in his need and found a true friend and realized that the one who raised up his son from a deathbed simply by uttering a word – and that at a distance – could obviously do much, much more for him and his family than that.

As C.S. Lewis put it in *A Grief Observed* [25]:

“You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then first discover how much you really trusted it?... Only a real risk tests the reality of belief.”

Well, that was the problem with the Galileans. There was not an admission of real risk, of danger, of terrible need. They were in danger, to be sure, they were at great risk before the judgment of God, but they did not recognize it and wouldn't admit it in their self-satisfied minds and hearts.

That was the difference between the Samaritans and the Galileans, the only real and true and significant difference. The Samaritans had come to realize that they needed Jesus desperately – their despised condition in the world perhaps made it easier for them to admit such a thing. Rich and successful people come to Christ in much smaller numbers than poor and struggling folk. The Galileans were proud. Their situation wasn't that great as the world measures greatness, to be sure, but they were capable of looking down on others. And they did. And so they were fascinated, as people will be, with someone who can work miracles, but, otherwise, the meaning, the significance of Jesus Christ completely escaped them. He struck no chord in them. They were not interested in what he came to give them. He was offering forgiveness and righteousness with God and they were sure they already had all that.

And this would be the story all through the Lord's ministry. Those who came to realize their great need suddenly saw in Jesus the one who could help them when no one else could. Those who refused to admit their need found Jesus first interesting, then entertaining, then irritating, and, finally, infuriating. For his message required them to admit dark things about themselves and they resented the very suggestion that there were any such things to admit.

But this father, he learned in the matter of his son's almost dying and Jesus' healing him, that he had needs only Jesus could meet. That is often the way the Lord God brings men and women to faith. It is not always that they are first made to see themselves as sinners needing salvation, needing a righteousness before a holy God they could never themselves produce. Often, they are, by some trouble, some catastrophe, some failure, some keen disappointment in life, made to realize simply how weak and needy they are. And once that is acknowledged the dam is broken and their need for other things – especially peace with God – can be acknowledged. So, it seems to have been with this man.

He began by looking to Christ for the earthly life of his son. He concluded by looking to Christ for his own eternal life and that of his family.

And so, there is the Bible's and the Lord's distinction between true and false faith. False faith looks to Jesus for what will interest and entertain in life. He may be able to help me with this or that, while, at the same time, I remain the same person I was before, without need for fundamental change of loyalty or behavior. Most of the church that met Jesus when he was in the world responded to him in that way. When he absolutely demanded more, they turned on him and killed him.

True faith, on the other hand, looks to Jesus in desperation and realizes that he and he alone can give me what I absolutely must have for life and for happiness both in this world and the world to come. And, in that recognition, finds in Jesus a Lord and Savior worth every ounce of my loyalty, my obedience, my love, my trust, my confidence.

I was reminded the other Sunday, in the Foundations Class, of William Haslam, whose story I have told some of you before. In some ways, it is very much like the story of this father in Galilee. No doubt this man too was a religious man, an upright man, a man who, up to that time, had no real concerns about his state before a holy God. He had been content to take God's favor for granted, he thought well enough of himself to do so. It was the near death of his son that changed all of that and took him out of the blindness of his pride.

Well so with William Haslam. He was among the large number of Anglican priests who held pastorates in English churches and preached every Sunday, but who had no living faith in Jesus Christ. But, through a variety of circumstances, he had become unsettled in his heart and conscience. He began to be aware that his religion was more outward than inward, what Paul had called "a zeal for God, but without knowledge."

One Sunday morning, October 19, 1851, he was preaching a sermon to his church and was making the point that the Pharisees had been condemned because they had not believed that Jesus came to save them from their sins. As he preached, he realized for the first time that he did not really believe it either. As he continued with his sermon he saw the truth more and more clearly. "I do not remember all I said," he wrote in his autobiography, "but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul.... Whether it was something in my words, or my manner, or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation, stood up, and putting up his arms, shouted out in Cornish manner, 'the parson's converted! The parson's converted! Hallelujah!' and in another moment his voice was lost in the shouts and praises of three or four hundred of the congregation." The vicar's own conversion sparked a revival in the parish that lasted for three years. Haslam was thereafter known as the parson converted by his own sermon! [Philip Evans, "The Parson Converted by his Own Sermon," *The Evangelical Library Bulletin* 77 (Autumn 1986) 2-3]

Like the father in Galilee and the rest of the Galileans, he had faith of a sort; he was a religious man. But he had no living trust in Jesus Christ for life itself, his heart had not yet been engaged with Jesus as he is – the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Both states of mind can be called faith and are in the Bible, but the difference between them is the difference between light and darkness, life and death, heaven and hell.

You find yourself in this account. Do you see yourself in the Galileans or in the Samaritans and the father of the dying boy? John is telling you and the Holy Spirit is telling you that only the Samaritans and the father among all these folk believed so as to live forever!