
THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH

A few weeks ago, we heard the Great Commission, JESUS' directives for HIS disciples before HE ascended to heaven, to go and make disciples.

- Last week, we read the text that included JESUS' instructions for the disciples to go out to preach, and to heal, and to cast out demons.
- This was a mission that required great trust on their part.
 - Reading further, we find that they were to take no money or provisions with them, but rather depend solely on the grace of GOD shown in the hospitality of others.

This passage continues JESUS' guidance to them as they prepare to leave on their mission, as HE warns them of the challenges they and anyone who seeks to share the gospel will face:

- rejection, slander, persecution, perhaps even death.
 - Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

Sharing the faith requires...well...faith—real faith,

- faith in the power and provision of GOD.
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We talk a lot about faith.

- Today, though, I want to help us think about faith by talking about the opposite of faith. Now you may think that the opposite of faith is unbelief or doubt.
 - Instead, I want to suggest that the opposite of faith is fear.
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Fear, in many ways, is the antithesis of faith.

- So, when encouraging HIS disciples, JESUS uses that hallmark of good news in the scriptures, "Don't be afraid."
 - Anytime someone—a prophet, an angel, or even the SAVIOR—begins a message with, "Don't be afraid," you're about to hear good news.
 - On the other hand, if they begin, "Woe to you," be prepared that it's not going to be great.
 - The phrase, "do not be afraid," occurs 365 times in scripture.
 - That's once for every day of the year.

So, after warning HIS followers about the possible difficulties that lie ahead, JESUS encourages them with, "Don't be afraid."

- And JESUS does more than just encourage them;
 - HE shows them the bigger picture,
 - and HE does this to instill in them the courage they will need.
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Courage is rooted in GOD'S promises.

JESUS reminds them not to fear because, while their opponents may be able to hurt them physically, they can do them no harm spiritually.

- GOD is the ONE who has power over both body and spirit, and GOD has promised to guard and protect JESUS' disciples and bring them to eternal life.
 - The GOD who created and cares for every living thing knows them intimately and values them more than anything else.

Still, fear of conflict can be very debilitating.

- The fear of conflict controls many of our actions more than we might like to admit.
- This gospel passage truly gets to the heart of one of the most paralyzing characteristics of many faith communities.
- We honestly don't know how to calmly discuss issues that we are passionate about.
 - We don't know how to listen to each other with the goal of better understanding the position of the other.
 - The result is that we become so afraid of conflict—whether within our immediate families or our families of faith—that our convictions go unspoken, our witness becomes muted, and any forward movement is greatly limited.
 - We allow our hopes, plans, and mission to be held hostage by fear of conflict.

Yet, it is into these situations that JESUS invites us to remember that there are worse things than conflict,

- and reminds us that the call to take up the cross will have costs,
 - including, at times, conflict.

So, how do we overcome fear?

- How do we get a handle on it so that we can speak the words and do the things our LORD needs us to do?

First, we need to acknowledge our fear and how much it dominates our lives.

- There is so much of which to be afraid today:
 - fear for loved ones;
 - fear about an uncertain future;
 - financial fears;
 - health fears;
 - environmental fears;
 - global fears;
 - natural fears.

Naming our fears helps us to deal with them;

- to receive comfort and assurance from others;
- to begin to consider options;
- to seek help and plan to overcome them.

When my brother, Joel, found out that he had lung cancer, he told me that this was just a new opportunity to witness to his faith in GOD.

- Because so many people wanted to know how he was doing, he began sending out emails called, "Joel's Medical Updates."

First, he would state what was happening in his treatment.

- "I've started chemo.
- "I have some nausea.
- "I've lost all of my hair."

Next, he would report on the down side of what was happening.

- "I have a little trouble eating breakfast in the morning.
- "My head gets cold.
- "I'm no longer eligible for the 'Body Beautiful' competition.

Then, he would list the points on the upside.

- "Terry (his wife) likes playing with the fuzz on my head.
- "I get to sleep in fifteen minutes longer because I don't have to shave.
- "I don't have any pain.
- "I still can go to work.
- "People say I look great. (I wonder how I looked before.)
- "I have a lot of people praying for me. (Thank you.)
- "I'm still trust that GOD is going to heal me. (I just have to convince my oncologist of that.)
- "I'm still ripe for a miracle.
- "GOD is still good all the time!!
- "The list still goes on..."

And he ended everyone of his updates with those three final statements.

Acknowledging our fear gives us power over it.

- Take a moment to think about or even jot down two or three fears with which you struggle today.
 - Then find a time this week to share them with someone you care about and who cares about you, and courageously name them out loud.
 - See if you don't feel a degree of freedom or control just by naming them to another.

Second, respond in faith.

- How we respond to the challenges of life depends upon our perspective.
 - Are the hardships you face things to fear,
 - or are they opportunities to exercise your faith?
 - Is potential conflict with a family member, or colleague, or church member, or friend something to be avoided,
 - or is it an opportunity for setting boundaries, building bridges, affirming healthy patterns of behavior, and nurturing growth in faith?

Responding in faith allows us to recognize, first of all, that hardships and challenges are not sent from GOD,

- and second, that if GOD can use something as awful as the cross to work redemption,
 - then GOD can and will work through our challenges and conflicts for the sake of life.

Remembering that GOD loves us and will bring good out of the worst of situations can help us to overcome fear,

- and respond to the challenges we face with anticipation and excitement.

Do you believe that GOD has your best interests in mind?

- Do you believe that GOD is and will be with you through the greatest challenges that you can face?
- Do those promises help you to avoid fear?
 - Then that, dear Christians, is the beginning of growth in faith.