

Bona Fide Faith*1st in series on Peter's Principles*

1 Peter 1: 1-9

04-19-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Today we begin a new worship series entitled *Peter's Principles*. During April and May, we will focus on the New Testament book of 1 Peter. The Bible contains two letters written by **Peter**. 1 and 2 Peter have traditionally been associated with **Simon Peter**—the leader of the Twelve Apostles and the New Testament church.

The letters were addressed to the churches in Asia Minor which today would encompass Turkey. The epistles were circular letters, designed to be read and then shared with the next congregation. Peter wrote to encourage the church during a time of persecution and trial. The pastoral spirit of the epistles assures the believers of God's providence and challenges them to remain faithful.

I invite you to read and reread the 1 Peter's five short chapters during the weeks ahead. For extra credit, you can also read the three chapters of 2 Peter! Today we begin the series by examining how to gain and maintain a *Bona Fide Faith*.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 1: 1-9**Introduction**

It happened years ago in a moment of weakness, but the memory still haunts me. During the first year of his life, our second-born child did not sleep much at night. We took turns staying up with him, and I became well acquainted with the early morning TV schedule. Late one night I was channel surfing and came across the **Home Shopping Channel**. I hesitated for a moment and was lost.

The host must have drunk a pot of espresso coffee because he was WIRED. The smile never slipped from his face as he sold tool sets, computers, cameras, and juicers. Just before he collapsed in nervous exhaustion, his female co-host took over. She introduced HSC's FINE line of quality jewelry. Terms like diamonique, tanzanite, zirconium, and faux pearls rolled off her tongue.

Then the hostess introduced the REAL **diamonds**, exclusively unearthed for HSC in their secret mines. The sample stone shone with dazzling brilliance in a spot light. The price was a real deal—the hostess said so. And no one would EVER lie on TV or the internet. So . . . I picked up the phone and dialed. Before you could say "But wait, there's more!" I had my very own HSC membership number and had placed an order. After days of waiting, the "diamond" finally arrived.

You've seen gravel—grey stone with specks of black? The "diamond" didn't look that good! *Consumer Report* later ran an article on the shopping club's jewelry. One expert said, "Their white stones are rocks with specks of dirty diamonds inside!"

I. Bona Fide Faith

Sometimes the distinction between genuine and counterfeit is obvious. Other times the difference is much more subtle. A sparkling gem might be glass while a

diamond-in-the-rough appears worthless. Today I challenge you to wrestle with the question, “Is my faith real or imitation? Is it genuine or counterfeit?”

This leads to a very basic question: What IS **faith**? This is a term we often use in the church. However, it is a slippery substance to define. Synonyms for faith include confidence, trust, assurance, reliance, conviction, belief, devotion, and loyalty.

Hebrews 11: 1 says that “*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*” In Eugene Patterson’s paraphrase of the Bible entitled “The Message,” he translates the verse to say: “*The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.*”

Oftentimes a dictionary will have an illustration next to a word’s definition. Whose face appears in your mind when you hear the word “faith?” Even if we cannot define faithfulness, it is recognizable when we encounter it.

Faith includes both **faith IN** and **faith ON**. Faith IN is a theological set of beliefs. Faith ON is a personal trust in God. Mature faith contains both of these elements.

The opening chapter of 1 Peter talks about the challenges of faith-filled living in the world. However, trials and tribulations result in an unexpected benefit for the faithful. Peter writes: “*In this you greatly rejoice, thought now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*” (1 Peter 1: 6-7)

“*Your faith . . . may be proved genuine.*” William Barclay translates this phrase as “*tried and true faith.*” Mature Christians possess a real faith that grows stronger rather than weaker during times of trial and temptation.

A good synonym for “genuine” is “**sincere**.” This term comes from two Latin words: “sine” and “cere” which literally means “without wax.” In antiquity, if pottery cracked in the kiln, an unethical potter could patch the flawed piece with wax and glaze over it. Flawless pieces of pottery, however, were marked “sincere” or “without wax.”

Genuine faith is sincere—the fires of trial and tribulation reveal a life without flaw or fault. Bona fide faith literally means “good faith.” Such faith consists of two elements: **faith in** and **faith on** Christ.

II. Faith In

Faith is first a belief **IN** God’s truth revealed in Jesus Christ and recorded in Holy Scripture. WHAT we believe is important. The content of our theological beliefs is critical. Naming and claiming our faith may be more important now than ever.

We live in a pluralistic culture with a smorgasbord of religions. I recently read a newspaper article discussing how Atlanta’s international population has transformed the religious landscape. In addition to Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, there are now Moslem mosques, Hindu temples, Buddhist shrines, Jainism centers, etc.

In a recent press conference in Turkey, President Obama said: “One of the great strengths of the United States is ... we have a very large Christian population—we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider

ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values." Regardless of your political beliefs, this statement may be uncomfortably true.

The April 13, 2009 *Newsweek* cover story was entitled "*The Decline and Fall of Christian America.*" According to *2009 American Religious Identification Survey*, the number of self-identified Christians has fallen by 10% during the last 20 years in the United States. During the same period, the number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has almost doubled from 8 to 15%.

Even those who profess the Christian faith don't always know exactly what they believe. A minister told a story about a church member asking him, "What do I believe?" The pastor said, "What do you mean?" The woman described a recent conversation with a Jewish and Muslim friend about religion. The discussion made her realize how little she knew about her own faith. The minister concluded the story by saying, "This woman did not enter the church by confession of faith but confusion of faith!"

Some people have a live-and-let-live attitude. They say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere." In a marketplace of religion, we dismiss doctrinal differences as matters of persona taste.

However, we believe that content is important in other areas of our lives. No one would tolerate a nice pharmacist who constantly misfiled prescriptions. Or a cheerful grocer who sold contaminated meat. Or a popular school teacher that taught erroneous information. Sincerity is not a substitute for poor quality. If it does not matter what we believe, then the Christian faith cannot be distinguished from astrology, spiritualism, voodoo, or a science fiction author who decides to create his own religion.

The content of our belief IS important; and I am concerned about the state of **Christian Education** in the church today. I fear that we are raising a generation of Biblical and theological illiterates.

Our society has determined that a high school education is the minimum level of education required to succeed. College students are now being told that a college degree is not sufficient—they should plan on graduate studies.

I did the math a while back. If children have perfect attendance at Sunday School and church for two hours a week for the first 18 years of their lives, then they will gain the equivalent of one-half of a first grade education. The reality is that most would not graduate from kindergarten.

We are called to a lifetime of continuing education to learn and grow. Immerse yourself in Scripture. Find a small group study. Read the great devotional works of the church. Explore theology. 1 Peter 2: 2 says: "*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*"

Certainly we can agree to disagree on the trivial. However, we dare not compromise the core elements of the Christian faith. The watchword of the ecumenical movement is: "*In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity.*" If you

want a concise statement of the essentials, then you cannot do much better than “*The Apostles Creed*.” It is the theological content of the Christian faith in a nutshell.

III. Faith On

Belief IN is a critical part of our Christian faith; but intellectual assent to spiritual truths is not enough. James 2: 19 vividly illustrates the futility of right belief alone: “*You believe that there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder!*”

Belief IN must be coupled with a belief ON. Bona fide faith includes both head and heart, intellect and soul, knowing and trusting. It is not enough to know that Jesus Christ is THE Savior and Lord, he must become MY Savior and Lord. We must let go of our lives and trust in God.

One day a tourist was peering over the edge of the **Grand Canyon**. The ground gave way, and he fell over the side. Miraculously, he grabbed a scrawny bush ten feet down the cliff’s side. Terrified, he screamed, “Is there anyone up there?”

A voice from the heavens thundered out of the clouds, “Yes, I am always here.”

The tourist sighed in relief and asked, “Can you help me?”

“Certainly,” said the voice. Do you have faith?”

“Oh, yes, STRONG faith.”

“In that case, simply let go of the bush, and I will catch you.”

After a long pause, the man yelled, “Is there anyone ELSE up there?”

In the movie, *The Matrix*, Neo discovers that the world around him is an illusion. He has power that he has yet to claim. With faith, even the impossible is possible.

The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, said that reason and intellectual belief can only carry us so far up. Then we come to a gap that requires a “*leap of faith*.”

This phrase that I learned in seminary often came to my mind when our children were first learning to swim. Outfitted in floaties and life jackets, they would stand on the diving board while we treaded water below. After long moments of hesitation, they would gleefully jump in. Not because they trusted their floatation devices but because they trusted their parents.

Repeatedly in life we come to a point when we must take a leap of faith. Declaring Jesus Lord of my life means that I trust ALL things to him. However, this is a process rather than a single time event. We all have a spiritual checklist with two columns. ON one side are the things we have given to God. On the other side are the things we have held on to for our own. It is ludicrous if we think about it for a moment. We humbly believe that we can manage certain areas of our lives better than God. What have you not trusted to God?

Marriage
Child
Work

Personal Finances
Habits or Addictions
Relationship

Time
Job
Church work

Past mistakes

Future Anxiety

Present problems

If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, then we can move mountains. We must name and claim the power that is ours as God's people. All things are possible for those who believe.

IV. Faith In and On

Both faith IN and faith ON are important. They are two sides of the same coin. Or to use a different image, they are two wings on a plane—which wing is more important? I'm thinking BOTH are! Faith and works, works and faith—they are different aspects of the same reality.

I love a statement by the late, great Paul Harvey who said: "If you don't live it, you don't believe it!" The statement recognizes both realities—you must believe it AND live it in order to make it your own.

God's Word is filled with promises of blessing for those who grow in faith. According to 1 Peter, through faith we are shielded by God's power (1 Peter 1: 5). Genuine faith will result in praise, glory, and honor when Christ returns (1 Peter 1: 7). We will receive the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1: 9).

Hebrews 11 contains a "roll call of the faithful" from the Old Testament. These patriarchs and matriarchs lived out their faith in God.

Conclusion

Are we willing to settle for a false faith? An impure belief of rock sprinkled with dirty diamonds? God's desire for us is a multi-caret, brilliant cut, class "A" faith. A genuine faith that is not counterfeit. A sincere faith without wax. A tried and true faith. A bona fide faith. A faith in God and a faith on God.