

Letting Go of Unbelief To Be Set Free

March 3, 2018

Today is week 3 of my preaching series of things to let go of during our preparation for the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection on April 1st.

1. In week one we looked at the importance of letting go of the destructive pattern of “**people pleasing**.” It's a destructive way to live because what other people think about you can become more important than what God thinks of you. And succumbing to that pressure can easily lead you down a path of sin and away from God.
2. Last week we looked at the prevalent danger of the sense of **Entitlement**. And we discovered that we didn't really invent this one. In fact we can trace it all the way back to before the world was created and to Satan's failed attempt to overthrow God. And I pointed out several other examples of this sense of entitlement played out in the lives of people in the Bible. Living with this sense of entitlement can create within us a powerful sense of disappointment which can lead to anger, resentment and rejection. And this life attitude can easily creep into your relationships with other and even your relationship with God. I suggested a two pronged approach to combat this attitude.
 - a. First, remember what each of us actually deserve, which is God's judgment and eternal separation from Him
 - b. Cling to and claim many of the entitlements that followers of Christ have been promised. I've included an insert in your bulletin this morning that includes many of them and has space for you to add some of your own.
3. This morning we're going to look at another destructive belief pattern – and it's actually the prevalent **sin of unbelief**. Now, you may be thinking – finally an attitude or belief that doesn't apply to me, because I believe in God. But let me encourage you to listen to the sermon anyway, because I believe that even many Christians often struggle with this sin of unbelief, and may not realize it.

You may have picked up that I called this a “**sin**”. That's because of the clear teaching of **Romans 14:23** *...everything that does not come from faith is sin.* and not having faith in God is unbelief. But right off the bat this definition can create a problem for many people because we've equated “belief” as a proposition I accept with my mind. Such as I believe that the sun will set later this evening. Or you believed that the chair or pew you're sitting in would hold you when you sat down on it – otherwise you wouldn't have likely sat down in it. But “faith” in the Scripture was more than merely believing something with your mind. Faith or belief also involved acting on what you believed. Let me give you a few examples to illustrate what I'm talking about.

- After God miraculously rescued the Israelites out of Egypt, His desire was to bring them into a new land, often referred to as The Promised Land. However, before they crossed the Jordan to go into it, Moses sent 12 spies into the land to check it out. They came back and gave this report:

Numbers 13:27-31 (NIV) *“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. 28 **But** the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”*

30 Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

*31 **But** the men who had gone up with him said, “We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”*

Do you see where the unbelief of these men crept into their report? It's at the two “Buts”. It's not that they didn't still believe intellectually in God. They weren't all of a sudden believing that God no longer was real or existed. But they disconnected the God they believed in with the challenge in front of them. They no longer clung to the promise that God had given them that this would be their land and He would help them conquer their foes. Much like the Israelite army did whenever Goliath came out and threatened them – they focused more on what looked like an insurmountable challenge across the river

from them and determined that they couldn't possibly conquer them based on their strength and power. That's called "the spirit of unbelief" and we often struggle with that.

Hebrews 3:19 summarizes what happened here with this statement: *"So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."*

They didn't combine faith with what God had said and fear stole their God-given opportunity from them – until after this whole generation had perished while wandering in the wilderness. And then God started over with a whole new group of people and they chose to not persist in the unbelief of their parents but they chose to believe and trust in God and they conquered their Promised Land.

Throughout the Bible we have many great examples of people who had faith and acted on it and others who chose unbelief and acted out of that as well.

- There's the example of **Elijah the prophet** and a **widow at Zarephath** recorded for us in **1 Kings 17:8-16**. There had been a drought of rain in the land and the river Elijah had been relying on dried up. So, God instructs Elijah to go over to the pagan city of Zarephath in the country of Sidon and stay with the widow there who God has commanded to provide Elijah with food. However, when Elijah arrives and encounters the woman it sure appears that she's not aware of any command by God upon her life. In fact, we discover that she's just about out of food for her and her son. She has just enough to make one more loaf of bread and then she figures that'll be it – they'll both eventually die. She's apparently all alone with no one else that she can depend on to lend her any more bread or the ingredients to make it. When Elijah encounters her he asks her for a drink of water and a small loaf of bread. She informs him that she'd really like to but she just can't give him her last loaf of bread. Elijah tells the woman that he's been sent by God and that God promises that if she does this for Elijah, then God will keep continuing to provide the flour and oil for as long as she needs it for her and her son. Now, here's the moment of her faith decision. Does she trust God for this rather strange and miraculous provision of unending flour and oil and give Elijah her last loaf of bread – or does she choose to rely on her strength and resources and make the last loaf from her own resources and her and her son eat it and prepare to die? **What would you do in that situation?** The truth is you and I are continually faced with that decision. The decision to either live off of our own ingenuity and limited resources or rely on God's unending resources.
- Jumping ahead to Jesus' ministry, probably the most well known example of unbelief would be the father would the demon possessed son recorded for us in Mark 9:14-29. It's the story of a desperate father who has a son who is possessed by a demon and this demon throws his son into convulsions and robs him of the ability to speak. This father's heart had to have been broken to see his son in this condition day after day. And the father had hoped Jesus' disciples could cure his son, but they were unable to. So, one day, Jesus has come to town and he appeals to Jesus to help his son. Let me pick up reading this encounter between the man and Jesus.
Mark 9:21-24 (NIV) Jesus asked the boy's father, *"How long has he been like this?"* *"From childhood,"* he answered. *"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."* *"If you can?"* said Jesus. *"Everything is possible for one who believes."* Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* Jesus proceeds to cast the demon out of the boy and free him from that horrible bondage. It's a remarkable account of the compassion and desperation of a loving father and Jesus' response to this man's request. I believe we can understand why He asks Jesus for help but couches it in, *"If you can?"* He may have tried other routes to break his son free from this horrible possession. We do know that he asked Jesus' disciples to do it and they were unable to. And so, I believe it's understandable that his faith was hopeful yet wavering when he asks Jesus to help him overcome his unbelief. What I find encouraging out of this encounter is that Jesus met this father where he was and healed his son. He didn't tell him to come back when he had a full blown doubt free faith. Jesus met him where his level of faith was and healed his son. And Matthew's account of this healing records that after everyone had left they approached Jesus and asked why they couldn't cast this demon out. And he responded with:

“Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20 (NIV)) On the one hand that had to have been a little discouraging to the disciples to hear Jesus declare that their level of faith wasn’t even the size of a mustard seed. And yet to them and us, it’s also encouraging and empowering that if we can have even a small amount of faith we can accomplish tremendous things as God works in and through us. So, while many of us can relate to this father who asked for Jesus to help him overcome his unbelief, that’s never the goal to keep using that excuse over and over again in our relationship with Jesus. Our goal and prayer ought to be that God increases and grows our faith to a constantly new and deeper level of trust and faith.

- The disciples were often up and down with their level of faith.. Jesus once rebuked them, when they were frightened by a storm, for their lack of faith (Mk 4:40). And after his resurrection, Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith in not believing the women who reported he had risen (Mk 16:14).
- In studying the Gospels you can’t help but come away with the understanding that there’s something key about our faith or lack of it that determines what God can and can’t do in our lives.
 - It states that Jesus was unable to perform many miracles in his own hometown because of their lack of faith (Mt 13:58).
 - And yet several times with others he says that it’s their faith that healed them. (Mk 5:32-34; 10:52; Luke 7:50; 17:19).
 - Two blind men were calling out to Jesus to heal them and he asked them if they thought he was able to do this? They replied, *“Yes, Lord”* then Jesus touched their eyes and said, *“According to your faith will it be done to you”* and their sight was restored (Mt 9:28-30).

One of the principles that we can glean from all of this is that faith, real faith believes that God is capable and willing to provide for the needs of His children. And often the disconnect is that we love to hear the inspirational stories of God doing this for others and yet we struggle to believe that He will do it for ME. For whatever reason, we listen to the lies of Satan and fall into his trap of believing that we’re not important enough or good enough or deserving enough for God to work in my life. And yet the proof of Scripture is that God provided for those who sought after Him, without preference to their race, or social status. In fact, Jesus most often reached out to heal those who were treated as outcasts. But those who received Jesus’ healing touch believed in Him and reached out to Him. For many, they had come to the end of themselves and Jesus was their only hope for healing. Which would seem to indicate to us that we need to come to the end of ourselves and our own efforts to make life work and instead of independence from God lean in with all of ourselves to Jesus and seek for His power and goodness and love to be displayed in and through our lives.

Hebrews 11:6 stresses the importance of this type of faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The key two elements of faith are:

- Believe that he exists (we often leave it at that)
- Believe God rewards those who earnestly seek him. (God wants to bless your life from His limitless storehouse). This doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ll be monetarily rich for Scripture often points out that in this world we’ll be persecuted and undergo hardships. However, God promises to be with us in the midst of these times).

Do you believe that God wants to reward YOU?

How big is your vision for what God wants to do for you? (because many people don’t expect big things from God for them).

Listen to these great promises of God for YOU!!

2 Corinthians 9:8 (NIV) *And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV) *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

Philippians 4:19 (NIV) *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*

2 Peter 1:3 (NIV) *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness..*

Have you experienced those promises to be true in your life?

Has God faithfully provided for your needs?

- If not, then why not? Did God run out of His supplies? (probably not)
- Did God decide He didn't love you enough to help you? (probably not)
- Was God unaware of your needs? (can't see that).

Well then, why weren't your needs provided for? Perhaps they weren't needs but wants. Perhaps you had a deeper need than what you asked him for and He's trying to grow you through teaching you patience.

The bottom line is that our greatest need is to know Jesus and as our Savior and Lord. But many Christians only know Jesus as their Savior, who's come to save us from our sins. But Jesus wants to do more than merely save you from your sins. He also wants to give you an abundant life here and now and that abundant life will continue forever in heaven. But don't miss out on the rich adventurous life He has in store for you right here as you continually draw near to Him and seek His goodness and many blessings.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed our struggle with anxiety and he said the remedy to living a anxiety free life is to "*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things you need will be given to you as well.*" (Mt 6:33).

Dream squashers will often tell you to be "realistic" regarding your plans in life. I don't see that advice anywhere in Bible. There's a Century Link ad running on TV right now where three ladies are sitting on a bench and one of them states that she recently signed up with Century Link for a **price for life high speed internet service** and the price is **guaranteed for life**. The other two ladies take turns denying that that's even possible by saying, "*They wouldn't do that*" several times. And the lady in the middle tries to assure them that they already have. That's much like much of our beliefs in God and what He's capable of doing. We don't necessarily doubt that God is capable of doing anything He wants to, but we often doubt that He'll do that for you and for me. Perhaps that type of unbelief is rooted in thinking He's too busy running the universe to notice and attend to my needs, or I'm not deserving enough for Him to respond to my needs. And so often what happens is that we pray with a lack of faith and we're often surprised when we actually get an answer to our prayers. That's living a life of unbelief and a life that's not honoring to God.

Jesus taught this principle to his disciples after he'd cursed the barren fruit tree and it shriveled up and died. The disciples were naturally amazed to which Jesus responded: "*Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*" Matthew 21:21-22 (NIV)

Now I'm not really sure what the purpose would be in going around casting mountains into the sea, but there's a whole lot of other areas of life that we certainly ought to be praying and trusting God for. Clearly from what we've studied this morning, God invites us to be bold in our prayers and in our lives.

We're called to trust God boldly and confidently and with really big vision. Let me suggest a few prayers worth praying.

- Pray for God fill your heart with an overwhelming burden for those who don't know Him yet. And pray that God would prompt others around you to want to know about Jesus. You'd be amazed if you pray that faithfully how many opportunities you're going to have to share your faith and relationship with Jesus with others. Pray specifically, by name, those you know who need to come to know the Lord.
- Pray for God's healing and strengthening of the marriages within this church and others you might now who are married. And if you're married, pray for the deepening and strengthening of your marriage and don't pray for your spouse to change but pray for God to change and soften your heart and equip you to be mate that He's called you to be.
- Pray for children (yours and others) that God would protect them every day from violence and from the world of temptations they have to enter into every single day. Pray for them to have bold courage to stand up for what they believe in and not succumb to the trends and traps that are awaiting them around every corner.
- Within your life pray for God's blessings and protection upon your own life. Be specific and bold in your prayers. For if you're not specific then how will you know if they are ever answered? Don't waste your prayers on your selfish desires but pray boldly for God to use you in whatever He desires to display His power and glory and grace and love to those around you.
- Pray for God to make you a threat to Satan's devices and plans for your life and the life of your family and friends. Jesus said when he established his church, his bride, which the gates of Hell would not be able to stand against it. We need to do more gate crashing and quit being so comfortable in our sitting here in these pews Sunday after Sunday.
- Pray boldly for the witness of this church and the empowerment for myself and the other leaders within this church that we might not shrink back from our calling to lead but that we might lead boldly and courageously.
- Pray that God would raise up more prayer intercessors who take prayer seriously and that God would raise up an army of prayer warriors who don't believe that God is small or mediocre or not listening to our prayers but that God is eager and chomping at the bit waiting for us to ask for His empowering and involvement in our lives and in the life and mobilization of this church.

I love the bold prayer that Peter and John prayed after being interrogated by the Jewish ruling council and told to not tell anyone about Jesus anymore and then threatened some more. Upon their release they thanked God for the opportunity to be persecuted in His name. And then they prayed this bold prayer: *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* (Acts 4:29-30 (NIV) *And it says that after they prayed this prayer the place they were meeting in was shaken, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God boldly.*

We need more individuals who refuse to be complacent in their faith in God but are bold and are willing to take risks and pray boldly and trust God entirely to display His glory in and through their lives and through this church.

