

Faith and Works XXXVI

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

The Path

Jeremiah 6:16-17 Thus says the LORD:

"Stand in the ways and see,
And ask for the old paths, where the good way is,
And walk in it;
Then you will find rest for your souls.
But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'
Also, I set watchmen over you, saying,
' Listen to the sound of the trumpet!'
But they said, 'We will not listen.'"

There is a difference between one who stumbles while following a path, and one who dives head first into a ditch (Hebrews 12:13). Demos, Paul wrote, left because he loved the things of this world more than the Gospel (2 Timothy 4:10). Those who hunger and thirst for God's righteousness will not settle for anything less than the water that eternally satisfies (Matthew 5:6).

There is a broad path many follow that leads to destruction, not completion. We are only in God's plan of salvation, made complete when we abide in Christ, leaving all that we had in the flesh, the natural, that which was built on the foundation of ourselves, and instead choose Jesus Himself as our foundation, our rock.

There is an aspect to the modern definition of Christian faith where for many their faith is now evaluated by how successful it can make them in the things the gentiles seek, the things they find comfort in, the praise of men, possessions, being rich and in need of nothing.

We often seem more interested in testimonies of what people have brought with them into the kingdom of God from their past accomplishments or worldly status before they knew Christ than we are in the testimony of what they found when they

found themselves abiding in Christ, instead of what they found when they found their life in Christ rather than their position and status in the world.

It is a naked church that would proclaim its success when it achieves these things and convinces itself that it has arrived at the end of the path that Jesus presented when He said we were to follow Him, after we had picked up our cross.

Jesus during His earthly ministry could always draw a crowd when the loaves and the fishes were multiplied, but when He spoke of man's need to partake of His life instead of their own, even many of His own disciples ceased to follow Him.

But many have side stepped the cross, and seek to follow Him, but not for the reasons He said He had come. He had said that those following Him would be those who were seeking first His kingdom, and that the things God knows we need, the things that are the main focus and goal of the gentiles, those without knowledge and a true hunger for God and His righteousness.

We can't be serious about seeking first His kingdom, if the end result and goal is to make us more successful in the eyes of the world in the things that it seeks, though in themselves, food and shelter are certainly good things to have, yet are contentment is first to be in our being members of Christ, abiding in Him, our treasure in Heaven in Christ.

Jesus is the way, it is not a way that leads to the completion of ourselves, it is the way that leads to our to being complete in Him.

Phil. 3:17-21 Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame — who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

Often it is the yeast of the Pharisees that Jesus warned of that can lead those who first heard the Gospel to turn to a path of self improvement, where the focus is on the self and its progress in improving itself through the exercise of various physical and mental techniques. It must begin, however, on the bases of the original lie, that we not only can perfect ourselves by our own efforts, but that we have the foundation needed to build on in the first place.

Religion can often become a cloak to hide or excuse our fallen condition. God's answer is for us to come to the end of our faith in ourselves, and instead base all we are and do on the finished work of Christ, and our inclusion in Christ as joint heirs with Him into God's family.

To follow Jesus is not to continue our own walk in our clothed in our own identity, seeking by our own deeds to merit or increase in holiness or God's favor. For such as those, there still remains an offering for sin.

If we would follow Him, it would be to first pick up our cross. Not a journey to find ourselves, but one that starts with the end of ourselves. To grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ is to be less self centered, and more Christ centered. What matters is not who we are based on the worlds current standards, but who is Jesus Christ, and our identification not with our temporal circumstances as a fallen being

in a fallen world, but as those redeemed by being identified with the death and resurrection of Christ. He took our sin on the cross, he raised us up with Him when He rose from the grave and God seated Him at His right hand. The devil cannot condemn those clothed in Christ, in His robes of righteousness, only those who may acknowledge Christ, but not rest on Him as their own foundation.

To be like Him is not to build ourselves up to greatness as it is perceived by the standards of this fallen world, for He who would be great in the kingdom of God would have the heart of a servant, not doing works to get payment as a slave, but serving out of love as a son for the Father.

Luke 17:5-10 And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

It is not an accumulative process that we engage in through the efforts of our own achievement. Indeed, it is a subtractive process; He must increase, we must decrease, those who abide in Christ and bear fruit, the Father prunes, our gold is tested by fire to remove the dross. It is our faith in the finished work of Christ, entering by faith into His rest, that we enter into a position, clothed in His righteousness, that we can speak and act on behalf of Gods work to yet make disciples of those yet to hear the message of the Gospel.

Yet we often seek societies and gatherings where we affirm each other in our natural identity, rather than a fellowship where all are members of Christ, clothed with Him, seeking to affirm each other on the bases of His finished work, not the successful completion of our own efforts measured by the standards of this current age.

The outward manifestation that causes the question of the reason for one's Christian faith to be asked is the fruit of love in response to God's love that we have received in Christ, the giving of all we have because of our faith and confidence in what we have received in Christ, confident that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that day.

By the worlds understanding of the peace and contentment it seeks according to the elementary principles of this world as apprehended through our own works, there is no need to question why someone hopes if the reason for the hope can clearly be seen and understood by their earthly status and possessions.

There will be no need to ask why a person is content, but rather how, by what means, what technique, by what method did one come to all these goods that bring such satisfaction, what did one do to merit such blessings that someone might be content in the things they have stored in their barns? People seeing worldly success will ask how one attained the praise one has received from men, the prestigious place they have attained in this city, this earthly kingdom.

But of the true Christian, one steadfast and content in all circumstances in Christ, the question that is asked is about the unseen things, what is the reason for the hope that is within?

1 Peter 3:15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Rom. 8:24-25 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

But for those seeking a goal mandated by their debt to the flesh, that life being built on the old foundation, the God or truth they are looking for is simply a fulfillment of their own desires of things that they wish to find, the completion of the journey they have chosen based on their desire to find how, by their own efforts, they might complete themselves.

James 4:3-4 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

And while man is usually traveling on the broad path to complete himself, it is usually the narrow path, as Joseph, Moses, and Jesus Himself traveled, that leads to the end of ourselves that provides the most direct place that we can come to where we realize our need for God's mercy, and the solution that He is offering us in the Gospel.

Growth in Christ is a subtractive process. Those that bear fruit are pruned, that built on the foundation is tested by fire. In conscious weakness is spiritual strength perfected. Seeking the lower loses the higher; losing the lower gains the higher.

Our need is not to complete ourselves, but to be complete in Christ. Often the road that we must travel is not one to complete ourselves, but the path to where we come to the end of ourselves, where we realize our need for what God is offering in the Gospel of His Son.

The liberal theologians of the past century, and those within the Emergent church movement today seem to think we need to change things and go off in a different direction, but neither were anywhere in the first place.

We are, it seems, in popular religious circles, running the bases following this and that teaching, all full of good advice, but never getting to home base, and most of those leading do not even themselves seem to know, or are concerned with where the home plate is, which is Jesus Christ.

And as we go along our way there are plenty of rest stops, places where we are enticed to remain and start building with the material which we earn by the value of our works, but it is material that will only fit on the old foundation, and when that is shaken all will fall. Nor is it suitable for the new foundation, for there it will burn. We are not to cloth ourselves, it is He who made us, not we ourselves, we are to come to the wedding clothed in His righteousness, His life, for He is the rock, all else is sinking sand.

Some of us have built small homes, modest dwellings by the world's standards, and some of us have been able to build large castles. Although it is all built on the same sand, there is usually enough compensation to somewhat appease our debt to our flesh, enough to keep us dissipated and distracted, caught up by the things and cares of this world, so that we take no thought of what is coming after this life is over, our issues of eternity find no place in the limited catalog of our earthly concerns.

Some are just enjoying the ride, not noticing that they keep passing the same street signs, unconcerned with the final destination. Our problem is we have often started our journey without consulting the map that God has provided, or, we have trusted a third party, even after the lives spent to provide us with the map in our own language, gathering dust on our book shelves, and we have started or continued our journey without a change in direction, or even a conscious choice in the direction we are heading.

Often, like Lots wife, we are seeking to move beyond our current situation, but our focus, our goal, is where we tried to go before. Jesus is not a short cut to the destination the gentiles seek. They seek the preservation of the flesh, while the Christian has left the flesh crucified with Christ, and now seeks to abide in and build on the foundation of Christ Himself, who is our life.

Many present themselves as leaders of the sheep, who seek to have us follow them, telling us that they know the way we should go, that they have arrived there by their efforts, by a technique they have learned and will teach us if we but follow and support their leadership. They bring drama, passion, enthusiasm, and the good news that everything will soon be all right if people just follow and imitate them. They tell us our frail fallen nature will yet find a way to mend itself, to claw its way up through the gates of Hades that stand so steadfast against our attempts to open them. They tell story after story about being at the destination, yet, in their personal lives, they are unfulfilled, never satisfied, always seeking some new possession or the praise of men to bring them the contentment they never achieve.

And yet they, and those who follow them, are really just going around the same ground all have traveled since Adam's fall. Running the bases, but never coming home.

They are promising those they have convinced to follow them that they can lead them to a place they have not themselves gone to, a place they invent stories about to embellish their own testimony, but which lead not to Christ, but to themselves.

Those who faithfully follow them may go to a hundred of their meetings, hoping to be lead to the physical, emotional, or spiritual release they seek. These leaders will always be telling stories about what happened at the other meeting while the true presence of God must be imitated by commotion and emotion. The followers will be told that elsewhere miracles happened, because those there had the faith, the right amount of passion, the will to manifest from themselves, in obedience to the leaders teaching, what they sought.

This has the effect of causing men to measure their faith as a work, and they lose faith in their abilities as their efforts fail to control their fate, rather than the focus and rest in the finished work of God in Christ. Faith comes by hearing the word of the Gospel, and it is faith in His name, and the faith that comes through Him that is the true faith the Bible speaks of.

Acts 3:11-16 Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all."

But in much of the modern teachings of faith, Jesus is not the object of our faith, faith is instead presented and taught as a technique that we learn to operate on our own behalf, and so the focus always comes back to the seekers themselves and the methods they use, rather than the final resting place of all those who seek beyond themselves the rest of God in His provision of life in Christ.

Peter and Paul write about how the false prophets would desire to draw away disciples to themselves. True shepherds lead sheep on the path to the water that forever quenches. Paul learned the secret of contentment in all circumstances, being a leader to that water in which his own eternal thirst was quenched.

But the false shepherds lead by what tickles the ears, because they are not offering eternal life in Christ, they are offering eternal life as a destination if only we would follow them and imitate their works. It is a prescription that may have some ingredients distilled from on some work they think Christ performed as an example of how to make ourselves like Him, but when all the dots are connected the path is back on the trail we originally where on before we heard the Gospel. It is usually a teaching or religions practice that is based on the expectation that now we will be able to do better following some principle or method that relies on our own abilities rather than finding our rest in the finished work of Christ and in whom we ourselves are to abide and find our completion.

Ultimately what happens as the result of the yeast of the Pharisees is that we get turned around from the door, Christ Himself, through whom we can enter through into fellowship with God, and instead we find ourselves marching backwards, away from the door, going back to building on the old foundation, that which should have been destroyed, that which we were supposed to leave behind us.

And what we seek to gather into our barns, that which we would take comfort in, will not fit through that door that God offers in Christ. We cannot take it with us, but it can take us with it if we continue to hold onto a life based on it.

We are either clothed in Christ, or we are trying to show up at the wedding feast dressed in our own filthy garments, still trusting in ourselves.

What the yeast of the Pharisees does is undo the baptism of John. John called everybody sinners, including Pharisees, religious people, people from all walks of life, and told them all to repent of their dead works, for all have fallen short of the glory of God, and all are in need of God's righteousness. All need to repent and prepare their hearts to receive the forgiveness to be offered in God's perfect lamb, Christ. For the kingdom of God is at hand, now is the day of salvation, and only those who know they are sick will receive the physician.

The essence of John's message was the announcement that it was the time of the end of man's attempts to improve himself, for by the works of the law, no flesh is justified, and it was time to get ready for the perfect Lamb of God for there was none righteous, no not one.

In John Chapter 10 Jesus spoke of those shepherds who were to lead the sheep to the door so that the sheep could enter in. That door is the only way out; otherwise the gates of Hades remain shut.

Matthew 7: 13-14 “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The point where we come to the end of ourselves, and our own understandings, is the point where we meet God. It is the place where we are ready to hear His answer for our need, which is Himself rather than continuing to seek remedies for our old nature.

Instead of progressing in our growth as a matter of our own achievements, the consistent advice of the Apostles in the New Testament is for us to stand firm in Christ. The journey to find ourselves ends when we are born again in Christ, for it is He who is our life. We are to take captive every thought that rises against the knowledge of who Christ is and who we are forgiven and risen with Him.

Until we rest from our works, realizing there is nothing more to be done, that the situation is incurable and hopeless, we will not come to the place where by faith we begin to build on Jesus Himself as our foundation. Until we truly cease our own works, where everything we do is calculated on how it will improve ourselves, we will not be able to do His works in His power for His Glory.

Both sin and religion have in common the presupposition that there is something that one can possess, control or some deed to work that will bring us out of the

fallen state and into the eternal, and as such one needs to recognize that anything that provides good advice should be evaluated not on whether the works are good in themselves, but rather, what are the works or goods being providing? If they are to be our foundation, and what we are is based on what we have achieved on our own, then no matter how good the works are in themselves, they are being used to build on the wrong foundation.

It is only when we come to the realization that the axe needs to be laid to the root of the tree that we might be grafted into another, that we begin the true development, not in progressing, but in learning to rest, in all the Christ has done.

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Indeed, all the works that Jesus spoke of his disciples doing when he gave the sermon on the mount, are based on the assumption that the follower of Jesus is not showing love and compassion as a way of building themselves up into a state of grace, but rather, the one who has all things in Christ who is our life, is free of the traps of ego, pride, the need to gather and protect earthly possessions, the need to be in competition with our neighbor to see who is successful and who is not. All of these are the fruit of the mind set on the flesh. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, and the sharing with our neighbor the love and forgiveness that we ourselves have received from God in Christ.

And so when Jesus told His disciples to pick up their cross and follow Him, He was not, as Paul points out, recommending a life of severe treatment of the body, but rather the death of it, leaving all that we are based on our fallen nature on His cross, and abiding by faith in Him as our new foundation. Unless one is born again, not mature or perfect in one's own works, one cannot, Jesus said, see the kingdom of God.

Here then we can understand what Paul was writing about in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. This was the path of his inward progress and growth in Christ. He speaks of all the things that he had done that ordinarily one might find confidence in, and leaves them behind him as worthless that he might get to the position where he stands free of all he might have relied on in the natural, that he might now clearly hear and respond to God's revelation of His glory in Christ.

Philippians 3:7-21 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.