

Keeping Favourites vs Welcoming All

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[0 : 00] But we begin the series today by thinking of what is by no means a new question in Christian faith. What is the relationship between faith and deeds?

Between what we believe and what we do? Between the content of our faith and our Christian action? Go out onto the street and ask people randomly the question, what is a Christian?

And my guess is you'll get one of two broadly responses. One response would be, well, a Christian, quite easy really, a Christian quite simply is somebody who believes in Jesus, who believes in his teaching, who believes in his claims.

Another response could be one that goes a bit more like this. Well, a Christian, of course, is somebody who engages in acts of kindness, who's a good, caring person, who's compassionate, who has mercy, who is full of grace and forgiveness.

In that sort of response, what you have is a description, not so much of what somebody believes, but more a description of what they do. The reality is, is that in Christian faith, in authentic Christian faith, as it is presented to us in the Bible, you can't separate the two.

[1 : 21] We've got some things put on the screen. Can we have the first one here? Some of you have probably seen these before, but when you look at that image, you're probably going to see one or two things straight away.

First of all, who sees two faces? Put your hands up if you see a vase. Okay. Next one.

Again, you've probably seen this. Who sees the face of a young woman looking away? Who sees the face of an older woman looking downwards? Yeah.

Last one. You may not have seen this one before. Who sees a face that's looking straight at you? Who sees a face that's looking to the side? You see, in all three cases, in those pictures, you cannot have one image without including the other.

You can say that you are drawn for a while more to one than the other, but the reality is, both exist. And when you present that image, you cannot actually exclude the other from it.

[2 : 25] And what I want to suggest to you is that when we look at the way in which Scripture presents God's desire for us to live our lives, we have the same kind of thing going on when it comes to the relationship between faith and action, between faith and deeds.

Yeah, our attention might be drawn to one or the other for a while, but the reality is you can't have one to the exclusion of the other. So over these next few minutes, let's just think about what it might look like if we were to have one to the exclusion of the other, or to fool ourselves into thinking that there could be such a thing.

Because the reality actually can sometimes be that that becomes what we live with. Let's first of all think about what it might look like were we to have deeds but without faith.

And what I want to suggest to you is in each case, whilst these can be realities, they're not realities that are actually authentic Christianity. So deeds without faith. What might that look like?

Well, the reality is that many people, many people would say, well, of course you can live a really morally good life without any kind of faith in Jesus Christ going on.

[3 : 46] Some of the kindest people, some of the most morally good people I know, don't profess to believe in Jesus Christ. They may not believe in God at all.

Now, of course, that's real, that's true. And we need to be quite clear that there is nothing in that observation that runs contrary to the claims of Christian faith itself.

Why? Because one of the very first things that the Bible tells us, that it teaches us about what it is to be a human being, is that human beings are fundamentally good.

And the reason why human beings are fundamentally good is because we are created in the image of God, who is good and love. That whenever we see the fundamental goodness of human beings, that is wired into us, that is part of our DNA, what we see is something of the fingerprints of the creation of God, who puts it there to begin with.

So when our hearts are stirred to reach out to others, when we actually see that something is wrong and we want to challenge it, when we want to do something to make a difference in the world, we don't need Christian faith necessarily for that to happen.

[5 : 07] Why? Because it's in our God-given humanity. And one of the things that makes us distinctive as human beings is precisely that instinct to do what is good, to do what is right, to have that sense of right from wrong.

Why? Because God has put it there. Regardless of whether we believe in God or not, we have about us that sense of morality, that sense of right, that sense of compassion.

Now we live in a broken world, and so let's not paint a naive picture of what it is to be human. Of course we are aware of the ambiguous nature of what it is to be a human being. But it is not true to say that human beings are all bad, neither is it good to say that humans are all good.

But the reality is in all of us, we have both, including that goodness that reflects the creator, from whom we all come, whether or not we actually believe in him.

But for all that, there is something that is missing. If, if we exclude faith from deeds. So if you've seen the film, Saving Private Ryan, anyone seen that film?

[6 : 21] It came out about 20 years ago. It's a really, really harrowing film. The first 15 minutes or so of the film depict the D-Day landings on the Normandy beaches.

But what the film tells is a story of a mother who has lost three of her four sons in battle. And news of this gets back to HQ, and to spare this mother's agony of losing all four sons, instructions are sent to the soldiers that they have to go into enemy territory and rescue the last remaining son, young Private James Ryan.

And Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, is the one who has to lead the mission. And he's not very impressed when he's told that he has to go and save this, when in his eyes it seems to be just another soldier.

He says, this James Ryan had better be worth it. After this war is all over, he'd better go off and do something worthwhile with his life, like cure some disease or invent a longer-lasting light bulb.

Well, to cut to the point, he is successful in his mission. Miller rescues Private Ryan, but not without a cost. He pays for the mission with a bullet to the chest, and he dies.

[7 : 46] But as he dies, he looks at the young Private Ryan who he has just rescued, and he says to him simply two words, earn this, earn this.

The film closes some half a century later on in Arlington National Cemetery with a now elderly James Ryan standing in front of the grave of Captain John Miller, reflecting on his life.

As he reflects on those words, earn this, earn this. And as he looks on Miller's grave, he says the following words, Every day I think about those words you said to me on that bridge.

I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. And then with tears welling up in his eyes, he turns with a sense of desperation to his wife and says, Tell me I'm a good man.

Tell me I'm a good man. You see, this man, and we're not told exactly what he had done since his rescue, but clearly throughout his life he had been desperately trying to make it up for the life that had been paid for his.

[9 : 11] He had been hounded by those words, earn this, earn this. And no matter how deep he had dug into his moral conscience to do the right thing in as many situations as he could, yet he was still haunted by those words, earn this, earn this.

history has proved itself that the harder we try to live a good life, the more and more aware we will become of our imperfection.

And in Christian history, we find time and time and time again those great heroes of the church who have actually found that the harder they try to live a good life, the more they are confronted with their own humanity and their own brokenness and failure.

You see, if we seek to live a life where we base it entirely on our own moral instincts with nothing else beyond, we are left with that strange sense of why, but what, and this sense of our own inadequacy.

There was once an oil refinery and every year, on one day of the year, there was a tour of that refinery where people, the members of the general public can come and be shown around the place.

[10 : 31] One particular occasion this was taking place, they got to the end of the tour and they opened up for any questions. One of the visitors said, excuse me, but could you show us the dispatch depot?

The tour guide looked with a sense of amusement on his face. He said, what do you mean? The visitor said, well, you've shown us around the oil refinery, but at no point have you shown us or do I remember being shown a place where all the oil that is produced in this place gets put into tankers and taken to the outside world.

Where is it? The guide replied, we don't have one. He said, what do you mean? He said, well, all the oil that is refined within this place is used in this place to keep it powered up and running.

What you have there is a picture of what life without faith in God can be like. That there's lots of activity, lots of action, lots of great stuff going on, but for all of that, very little sense of the beyond, of why, of purpose, of meaning.

And yet, and yet for all that, God is there, regardless of whether or not we recognise it. One of my favourite TV shows was shows, programmes, was Inspector Morse, followed by Lewis.

[11 : 57] I love those programmes. One of the things I love so much about them was that Colin Dexter, he died a couple of years ago, I think that the writer, the creator of Inspector Morse, would more often than not actually be featured in every, I think he was, in every single episode, in a very small way.

So he might just be in a background scene, sat at a table in a cafe drinking a cup of coffee, or he might be playing one of the dons in one of the Oxford colleges, and he would just walk past in the background.

But one of the things I would really enjoy about the programme is looking out for the author of the story to make his appearance just in the background. What I want to suggest is that what you have there is something of a picture of our lives, with the author of our lives, the God who has put the capacity to do what is good, what is right, what is true within us, there in our lives.

That every time we have that instinct to reach out and to do an act of kindness, to do something that is good in our lives, it is that author that is present in our lives making that happen.

But you know, we don't always recognise it. We'll come back to that shortly. But having spent a little while thinking about what a life of deeds but with no faith might look like, let's turn it on its head and think the other way round.

[13 : 16] Might there be such a thing as a life of faith but without deeds? Well, clearly yes, because otherwise what we just had read to us from the book of James would never have been written.

So what might it mean, what might it look like to talk of a life of faith, Christian faith, faith in God but without deeds, without action?

When I was a student an embarrassingly long time ago now, I can remember that one of our university lecturers defined a lecture as the transference of information from the tutor's notebook to the student's notebook without passing through the minds of either.

See, it is possible, quite possible, to take hold of information, to give intellectual assent to a set of propositions without it really connecting.

Years ago, in the old American West, there was a little village and a minister was appointed to the chapel within that village. And one day, he was walking along by the river and to his horror, he saw a number of members of his congregation dragging logs up from the river up ashore.

[14 : 48] On the end of the logs was marked the names of the owners of the logs. And he was horrified as he saw his church members taking saws and cutting off the ends of the logs bearing the names of the owners.

So he decided the following Sunday he would preach a sermon on the Ten Commandments. As he did so, he found himself really majoring on to the theme Thou shalt not steal.

Got to the end of the service, all his parishioners were leaving and they all smiled and shook hands and said, wonderful sermon, thank you very much. Clearly, they had not got the message.

So the following week he preached pretty much exactly the same sermon only this time he excluded the other nine commandments but really drove home the theme Thou shalt not steal.

Again at the end, very nice polite response. Thank you, Eka. Week three he preached exactly the same sermon only at the very end instead of saying Thou shalt not steal he said Thou shalt not cut the ends off thy neighbour's logs.

[15 : 53] They ran him out of town. Now maybe that exact story and its details don't chime with our experience but what I want to suggest is the disconnect is something that we all need to be challenged with.

The writer Craig Grouchel from a couple of years ago wrote a book called The Christian Atheist and in it he warns the danger of purporting to hold certain beliefs about God yet living our lives as though God doesn't exist.

You see it's easy to subscribe to to pay lip service to the God of grace and yet refuse to let hold of that personal grudge against another person. It's too easy to subscribe to the God of faithfulness and promise and yet trust more in money.

It's easy to subscribe to the God of new beginnings yet remain unconvinced that you can and will break those old habits. It's easy to subscribe to the God who is sovereign yet still worry all the time.

It's easy to subscribe to the God of forgiveness of love and yet continue to linger in guilt and shame from the past. It's easy to subscribe to the God who promises he will never forsake us and yet for us to pray as though it's some religious chore.

[17 : 16] It's easy for us to subscribe to a God of peace and mercy and compassion and yet vent aggressive outbursts in our speech or emails or whatever. It's easy to subscribe to the God who wants everyone to know of his love yet do nothing to share it with others.

It's easy to subscribe to the God whose love is life transforming yet fail to recognise that God really does love you. Here's a question for all of us. If you were to be arrested and put on trial for the charge of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to find you guilty?

You see the reality is all of us all of us have a certain mismatch a certain disconnect of some kind in our lives. It could be that we have a disconnect in our lives between what the Bible teaches about grace and our own habit of judging others.

It could be a disconnect between what the Bible teaches about sexuality and the reality of our own lifestyle. It could be the disconnect between what the Bible teaches about compassion and our own half-heartedness towards the poor.

You know, very often you'll hear people say, you know, the church is just full of hypocrites. You know, it's not true. We're not full at all.

[18 : 38] There's plenty of room for a few more hypocrites. Anyone can join. And that's the point. That's why we say that it is good news worth celebrating because in Christ God meets us.

Hypocrites though we may be, he meets us where we are. But part two of that good news is that he doesn't expect to leave us where we are.

You know, Jesus was asked, what's the most important commandment of all? And he referred back to something known in his Jewish thought as the Shema from the Old Testament.

He said, the love of the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And the second is like it, to love your neighbour as yourself. You see, we're back to those optical, those images that we started with at the beginning.

You can't have one without the other. But notice that when Jesus was questioned on this, he didn't say love your neighbour first, he said, love God first. Someone else once said, love Christ and do whatever you want.

[19 : 48] You see, when you have the love of God in your heart, when you know that he loves you unconditionally, when all is right there, action just falls into place quite naturally. when you know God loves you, when you realise, again to go back to that picture from Inspector Morse with the author of the story present within it, when you realise that God is there, that he's been there all along, then transformation can begin to happen.

One last story. There was a tiger cub that was orphaned, and somehow it's found its way among a herd of goats, and it was brought up as a goat, and therefore it grew up believing that it was a goat.

It used to behave in exactly the same way as these other goats. Well, one day the goats and this tiger were in the jungle grazing in a clearing, when suddenly a king tiger ran into the clearing and roared.

Immediately, without hesitation, the goats ran in all directions, but the tiger cub remained. It looked at the king tiger.

At first it trembled, but then it realised it didn't feel strangely afraid, as the goats appeared to be. The tiger cub, rather like a goat, bleated back at the tiger.

[21 : 19] The king tiger stared at the cub, and eventually picked up the cub by the scruff of its neck and dropped it next to a pool.

And the cub and the tiger looked at their reflections and could see that they were alike. Still, the tiger cub didn't quite get the message.

So the tiger took some meat and it dropped it down in front of the cub. The cub began to eat the meat. And then, upon the realisation of its true identity, he roared.

The reality is that God actually creates each and every one of us with the desire that each and every one of us would have faith and action as inseparable things, as part of what it is to be truly human.

As we come to pray at the beginning of Lent now, let's just bring our lives before God, as we are because we can come no other way, and let's ask him to come alive in us once more, that we, like that tiger, may learn to roar.