

Practice Your Faith

by: Ronald L. Dart

Do you take your faith for granted? Or is it like a lot of married couples, we have been together for so long, we can complete sentences for each other. We can take one another for granted and at some level that is a good thing. I can take it for granted that my wife will be faithful to me. I can take it for granted that she won't bust the budget. I don't have to check her credit card purchases. I only look at them to make sure that nobody is defrauding us with them. After 51 years of marriage, there aren't a lot of surprises, nor should there be.

At the same time, love calls on us to be attentive to one another and this is where we too often fall down. Sometimes we just don't listen when our mates talk to us. Sometimes we just go on doing whatever we're doing and we pay attention with half our mind. Now that isn't anything to become upset about, but it is wise to do something about it. We sometimes have to tell our loved one, I need you, right now. Please give me your undivided attention.

Do You Take Your Faith for Granted?

Now I want to take a step forward from this and ask if we take our faith for granted in much the same way?

As a man and his wife can drive down a highway together and not say anything for a solid hour, it is still good, isn't it to be together? As God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). There's a huge difference between silent companionship and an empty house.

At the same time, it may not be needful for us to speak to God every five minutes, but it sure is good to know He's there.

Now there is a problem lurking in the background, we can wind away through life by taking God for granted. Why should I ask Him to protect my job for me? I know He will. Why should I ask Him to protect my life on this journey that I'm taking? I know he will. Why should I thank Him for doing what He's going to do anyhow? You know it is like marriage, often when we ask God, "Will you?" His answer is, "Of course." But it is still good to ask, isn't it?

Just because it is your wife's job to cook the meal and clean the house doesn't mean that you don't need to thank her for it. Just because it is your husband's job to fix that dripping faucet, doesn't mean that you shouldn't be grateful that he was there to do it. Wives would really be happier if their husbands were mind readers. They are absolutely thrilled when we think of something to do, that needs to be done, and we do it on our own without being asked. The problem is, more often, wives have to ask. On the other hand God is a mind reader. But apparently He still wants us to ask.

Don't Weary God

Now sitting in the midst of all this is a paradox. When I come to a crossroads in my life and when I come to a decision that I have to make, and I have a clear principle in the Bible as to what I ought to do, is it really necessary to ask God to show me what to do? Or to ask God to do it for me? Or am I going to weary God asking useless questions? It is possible to weary God, you know.

There was a day when Isaiah spoke to King Ahaz. He told him, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God, ask it in a depth or the height above." Ahaz said, "I won't ask, neither will I tempt the Lord" and Isaiah responded, "Hear now, O house of David, Is it a small thing for you to weary a man, but will you weary my God also?" You find that in Isaiah 7 and verse 13.

Now God doesn't get tired and that is not the sense of the word 'weary' in this context. If I come to the point of annoyance, where I say, "I'm getting tired of this nonsense," you would know what I mean. God doesn't get tired, but he surely can become piqued with men. I don't want that to happen in my relationship with God.

Sacrifice of Fools

And so consequently when I come to a Scripture, like the one I find in Ecclesiastes chapter 5 and verse 1, it is fascinating in the way that it speaks of our relationship with God and our taking God for granted. He says this in verse one. "Keep your foot when you go into the house of God," which is just a way of saying be careful where you step. "Be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools." Now Hebrew writers are apt to use what is called, technically, inverse parallelism. In other words, they will give you two ideas in parallel, one of them the inverse of the other.

He says "Be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools." Which basically means to shoot off your mouth. "Be more ready to listen than to speak, for they don't consider that they do evil. Be not rash with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter anything before God. For God is in heaven, and you're on the earth. Therefore, let your words be few."

Prayer

Now you will hear some people talk about prayer, and you get the impression they're praying 23 hours out of every 24. That they're praying every 5 minutes and that they're praying all the time. And here's a Scripture that comes along and says, wait a minute, hold it, "God is in heaven, you're on the earth, let your words be few, for a dream comes through a multitude of business, and a fool's voice is known by a multitude of words" (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3).

Now I said, you'll often hear people speak about spending an hour in prayer. There's one thing you probably should know about that, very few people really do. They may spend an hour on their knees or an hour in their prayer closet and part of that time they'll be speaking to God, but most of the time their mind will be somewhere else, on something else, chasing off after some idea that crosses their mind. In a way, it is like saying, part of the time is in prayer, far more of the time is in meditation and that's just fine.

Now you have to understand that even between two people who have been married for 50 years, it's entirely possible to have too much to say. Just as it's possible to have too little to say and I'm afraid in many cases, marriages have troubles because people can't keep that balance.

What Did Jesus Say About Prayer?

Here's something that Jesus said on the subject of prayer. Lest we think "Well that's one person's point of view in Ecclesiastes." In Matthew six and verse five, here's the way Jesus approaches it, "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." For them, prayer is to be seen. "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But you, don't do it that way, when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you shut the door, pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. Moreover, when you pray, don't use vain repetitions, like a heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their much speaking."

More words isn't going to get the job done. God will hear you the first time you speak. Now once again, there's a paradox here that we have to wrestle with. The truth is, that sometimes, God wants us to persist in prayer and we have parables of Jesus telling us that too. One thing is clear, more words isn't going to make you more heard. "Don't be like them," Jesus said, "For your Father knows what things you have need of, before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8).

So it's hardly necessary for you to remind God, it is hardly necessary for you to nag God, even though it is necessary for you to be persistent.

Once again, the analogy for marriage presents itself, often one partner will know what the other one needs before the other one asks.

Jesus then followed up and said this in Matthew 6 starting in verse 9, and it is so familiar, you can actually pray this prayer with me. Here's what He said, "After this manner therefore pray you: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." This is the Lord's prayer and it is a model of brevity and simplicity. It is there, not for mere repetition, it is there as an example, and Jesus closes this out with one very important statement, "Forgive men their trespasses, if you don't do so, your Father in heaven is not going to forgive you" (verse 14).

Listen to God

There's one more particular Scripture in this regard.

It was King Solomon who told us that when we go in to the house of God, we need to be more ready to hear, to listen to God, than to talk. He makes this statement in Ecclesiastes chapter 5, verse three, "A dream comes through a multitude of business, and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words." I guess God knows that when there's a whole lot of words coming up, there is a fool on the other end of the line.

Now Solomon told us something else that was very important in chapter 3 and verse 1 of the Ecclesiastes, he said "To everything there is a season, there's a time to every purpose under heaven, there is a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what was planted. There's even a time to kill, a time to heal, a time to break down, a time to build up." He goes on and he says "There is a time to get, and a time to lose, a time to keep, a time to throw things away, a time to tear and a time to sew, a time to keep silence, and a time to speak."

It's true in marriage and it is also true with God. There is a time to speak and a time to shut up and do what you know you ought to do.

Responsibility for Decisions

Now since I can't learn things the other way, I had to learn this lesson by hard experience. I got to the place once where I had to leave the church I had served for 17

years and I just didn't want to make the decision. I prayed long and hard about it. What I really wanted to happen was, that God would intervene and cause something to happen so that I wouldn't have to decide.

Now you need to think really hard about this, when you want God to decide something for you, what you're really doing is trying to evade the responsibility for the decision.

When I was going through this particular trial, one day as I was praying to God for Him to show me what to do, the answer came as clear as crystal. There was no voice, but all of a sudden I realized, that God had shown me all I needed to know and more importantly, He had shown me all He was going to show me. What he wanted from me now, was a decision. He wanted me to accept the responsibility for what had to be done. I knew what I should do. I just didn't want the responsibility of the decision.

We face this so many times in so many different ways in our lives and it can even happen in a marriage. Lots of times we would like to shove the responsibility off on our partner.

That brings me to another important consideration: leadership.

Leadership

Leadership in family and church is a good thing, but there is such a thing as too much leadership. The reason is because it disempowers the person being led and relieves them of responsibility. Now I don't know but I may have invented a new word there, you probably have heard of empowering people, what I am talking about is disempowering people.

This may sound like a digression, but it is strongly related. I have heard people speak of empowering the membership of a church. The problem with this idea is it assumes that you have the power to give and if you have the power to give it, you also have the power to take away, it is your power. The real challenge is not to empower people, the real challenge is to not disempower people: churches, husbands, wives, children. Do not relieve people of the responsibility that is theirs by right and design?

We must not relieve the people of our churches. We must not relieve our husbands or our wives, or even our children of their responsibility by too much leadership. Sometimes you have to refuse to lead, in order to leave the door open for others to step up. I don't mean that we refuse to lead out of negligence or laziness. I'm talking about that moment when you are tempted to do it for them, and you refuse, for if you

do for people what they ought to be doing for themselves, you are disempowering them.

Now here is something about God you can take for granted. You could take it for granted that God will never disempower you. He will do very little that relieves you of the responsibility for your actions.

Over the years, I have had the distinct impression that God has a stark aversion to meddling in our affairs. But that doesn't mean that he's not interested. What it means to me is that He is very interested in how we handle the challenge. God is playing for very high stakes here. He isn't looking for specimens for His zoo. He isn't looking for robots or atom-a-tons that while they do as they're told, they can't do anything more. He's not looking for slaves, even though we may describe ourselves as His bond servants, but that's not what He's looking for. He is looking for sons. Now you can take this for granted.

Do You Take Your Faith for Granted?

But that takes me back to my original question on the other side of this question, we can take God for granted, but do we dare take our faith for granted.

There's a passage in Hebrews that I think is very relevant to this that I would like for you to think about. It is found in Hebrews chapter 4 and we will begin reading in verse 11, "Let us labor to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

I don't think we can take our faith for granted. We are, in the end, going to have to render account for it.

He continues in verse 14, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we do not have a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may find mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

Grace

Grace to help, that is a marvelous thing to say. Not that we may get God to do it for us, but that we can find grace to help when we have to go out and do it ourselves. In a way, this is what grace is all about. God will graciously help us, but that doesn't mean that He is going to do it for us. There is an old saying and it is true, "God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves."

Since grace is about this matter of God helping us to do what we ought to do, in chapter 12 and verse 14 of Hebrews, he says this, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled."

How is it possible for a man to fail of the grace of God? One hint that I have derived from all of this is that God's grace is the grace to help us do the things that we can do. Having that grace, it is still possible for us, not to carry out our duties.

Think about that.

The writer of Hebrews went on in chapter 12 and verse 25 to make this point, "See that you refuse not him that speaks." He is talking about God. "For if they escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape, if we turn away from him that speaks from heaven."

Back on Mount Sinai when God came down to give the Ten Commandments, it says, "Whose voice then shook the earth, but now he has promised, saying, yet once more. I shake not the earth only, but also heaven, And this word, yet once more, signifying the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain."

I don't know when this is coming, but I do know that it is out there.

The time is going to come when only the things that will be left are those that cannot be shaken. "Wherefore, he said, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Practice Your Faith

No, I don't think we can afford to take our faith for granted, not with our God being a consuming fire.

Now how do you avoid doing that? The answer to that, it's quite simple really, you practice your faith. You just have to practice. You do the things that a man of faith ought to do. For example, you study the Law of God for a guide to your conduct. Understand, the Law is not a means to salvation, or a way of salvation. The Bible, from front to back, makes that clear enough. That is not what it is here for. The Law is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path. (Psalms 119:105). It explains to you how you go about practicing your faith.

For example: If the Law tells you that you may eat some types of things, and you may not eat other things (Leviticus 11, Numbers 14), you shouldn't dismiss this idea out of hand. You can't just say that was Old Testament and it was all done away with. Now you may not entirely understand, but you can practice your faith by eating the things you should and avoiding the things you should avoid. It isn't the South Beach diet, but it is a way for you to practice your faith.

Another way you can practice your faith is to keep the (Saturday) Sabbath. Remember, the Bible says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day, that is the sabbath of the LORD your God." You're not supposed to do any work on that day so you take off work. You avoid that type of thing. You turn your heart and mind to God on that day. That's how you practice your faith.

Isaiah the prophet, in chapter 58, said this. "If you turn your foot away from the Sabbath, from doing as you please on my holy day. If you call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable, and shall honor him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, not speaking your words." Do these things. Practice these things. "Then you will delight yourself in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the high places of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it."

So, working six days and resting on the seventh. That's one of the ways you can practice your faith.

Yet another way is revealed in Matthew 23 verse 23, where Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, of judgment, mercy and faith: These you ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone." In other words, you tithe, yes, but you also practice judgment and mercy and faith. These are the ways you practice your faith.

Now there are other ways to practice your faith and they are just as important, for example in Matthew 25, verse 31, "When the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit upon his throne of his glory, and before

him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, like a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on the left, the King shall say to them on his right hand, "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous said "Lord, when did we do that for you? When did we do any of these things?" And he said, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

And so one of the ways we can practice our faith is in good works of giving to the poor and helping the weak, and those who are downtrodden.

And there is this in the book of Revelation chapter 21, "I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." You wouldn't want to take this for granted, would you?

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

This article was transcribed with minor editing from a Born to Win Radio Program given by Ronald L. Dart titled: Practice Your Faith - #04PYF

Transcribed by: bb 6/28/11

Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly on his Born to Win radio program.

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In the Portsmouth, Ohio area you can listen to the Born to Win radio program on Sundays at 7:30 a.m. and at 12:30 p.m. on WNXT 1260.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 509-2999 - 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net