

JUST A LITTLE FAITH WILL DO

Luke 17:5-10

Presbyterian pastor Dave Wilkinson tells a hilarious story about Randy Johnson, a former quarterback for Oklahoma State University. Randy is a nephew of the late President Lyndon Johnson.

It had not been a good year for Randy Johnson or the Oklahoma State team. And, to top it off, for the last game of the year, they faced the mighty Oklahoma Sooners. The game with the Sooners was almost over. The Cowboys of Oklahoma State were behind by six points. They had the ball, but there was time for only one play. They were on their own twenty yard line, eighty yards from the goal line.

The coach evidently thought the game was hopeless. He called time and put in all the seniors for the last play of the game so they could say they ended their college football careers on the field. He told Randy to call any play he wanted, since in the coach's estimation, they had zero chance of scoring. To the surprise of his teammates, Randy called play 13. It was a trick play that had never been used before in a game. It had never been used for good reason--it had never worked in practice.

Well, the impossible happened! Play 13 worked! At the very last second Oklahoma State scored! The fans went wild. As they carried Randy off the field, his coach asked him, "Why in the world did you ever call play 13?"

Randy answered, "Well, we were in the huddle, and I looked over and saw old Harry with tears running down his cheeks. It was his last college game and we were losing. And I saw that big number 8 on his chest. Then I looked over and saw Ralph. And tears were running down his cheeks too. And I saw that big number 7 on his jersey. So, in honor of those guys I added 8 and 7 together and called play 13!"

"But, Randy," the coach shouted, "8 and 7 don't add up to 13!"

Randy reflected for a moment and answered with a smirk, "You're right coach! And if I had been as smart as you are, we would have lost the game!"

(1)

I guess the moral of this story is that sometimes you need more than knowledge to win a football game. Knowledge will only take you so far.

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once told about a young man at a university who left a manuscript with his advisor for evaluation. He told the advisor that it probably wouldn't take him very long to read the manuscript, as it was only the first chapter--a chapter in which, he said, he explained the universe.

Wouldn't it be great if we really could explain the universe in one chapter? It would be great to have knowledge that vast. I know that I have enough problems in Bible studies trying to explain where Cain and Abel got their wives!

There is much in this world that no one knows or understands. We are all somewhat like Albert Einstein's wife. Someone once asked her if she could make sense of her husband's theories. She replied that she understood the words, but not always the sentences.

And that is the position that each of us are in, too. No matter how brilliant, or well educated, or how insightful we may be, when it comes to making sense out of life, we can usually understand the words, but we don't always understand the sentences. There is much in this world we do not understand. And the situation is getting worse. Today, human knowledge is expanding so rapidly that no one can catch up with it.

"By the time the child born today graduates from college," says one expert, "the amount of knowledge will be four times as great. By the time the same child is 50, it will be 32 times as great--and 97 percent of everything known in the world will have been learned since that child was born."

The memorizing of reams of facts will not be necessary, says this expert; these facts will be quickly available on our computers. But in the future, we will need more knowledge if only to know what it is we want to know. (2)

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Let us give thanks to God that we are not saved by our knowledge. In I Corinthians 1:27, St. Paul writes, "God chose what in the world is foolish to put the wise to shame . . ."

We are not saved by what we know, for then only the most educated and knowledgeable among us could gain entrance into God's kingdom. We are

saved, not by knowledge, but by faith. That's good news, isn't it? If we were saved by knowledge, many of us would be in trouble.

Josef von Sternberg was a legendary film director. A student once asked Sternberg what he would need to do in order that he, too, could be a successful director. Sternberg answered that he would need to speak several languages, understand history, and have some knowledge of psychiatry. He would also need to love the theater and drama above all else.

The student asked Mr. Von Sternberg whether he himself possessed all of those traits when he first started out.

To which Sternberg replied, "No, but then, I never asked anyone how to become a director, either!"

We will never have enough scientific nor technical knowledge to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. As Loren Eiseley has written, "It is not sufficient any longer to listen . . . to the rustlings of galaxies; it is not enough even to examine the great coil of DNA in which is coded the very alphabet of life . . . Beyond lies the great darkness of the ultimate Dreamer who dreamed the light and the galaxies [into existence]." (3)

It is not knowledge that brings us to God; it is something that goes far beyond our ability to comprehend with our gray matter the mysteries of existence. No, it is ultimately not our minds that are saved, but our souls. There is something deep within the human soul that cries out for God, and will not be satisfied until it is in perfect union with its Creator.

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But there is a second thing we need to see. **Just as we are not saved by the extent of our knowledge, we are also not saved by the level of our commitment.** This may be a little more difficult for us to grasp.

We cannot buy our way into heaven with our good works. There is no sacrifice that is great enough to guarantee us the favor of God. There have been Christians throughout the history of the church who have failed to grasp this primary spiritual principle.

A good example from the Middle Ages is a Franciscan Friar named St. Peter of Alcantara. He was a friend of St. Teresa. She described him like this.

“For some forty years he slept every night for no more than an hour and a half. Invariably he slept in a sitting position, with his head resting against a piece of wood driven into the wall. He could not, in fact, have lain down even had he wished, for his cell was only four and a half feet long.

“He wore nothing but a habit and a mantle of the coarsest fabric. His head and feet were always bare, regardless of the weather. He fasted for two days out of every three” till he was so weak that, in St. Teresa’s picturesque phrase, “he seemed to be made of the roots of trees.” He appeared very old when St. Teresa first met him, but it was his asceticism, not his years, that had aged him, for he was only fifty-nine.

He rarely spoke, according to St. Teresa, though when he did, it was a pleasure to listen to him. He had lived in the cloister as a member of the Barefooted Reform within the Order of St. Francis from the age of sixteen. For much of this time he had been a complete solitary. He always walked with downcast eyes. He once confessed that, after living in a certain house of his Order for three years, he did not know a single friar by sight. (4)

That poor man. How could he have missed so completely the abundant life that Christ has promised? How could he have read the teachings of Jesus and concluded that mortification of the flesh would draw him closer to God? Jesus was a man who loved life, and he loved people. He did not call people to withdraw from the world, but to go out and win the world.

There is a chapter in Professor Thomas Jessop’s book, *Law and Love*, with the provoking title “The Badness of Goodness.” It shows quite clearly how it was not the publicans and the sinners who were the enemies of God, but those whose lifelong purpose was to lead good lives. (5) That is what happens when people begin to believe that they are saved by their own perfection, their own hard work.

We are not saved by knowledge--although knowledge is important. God gave us good minds for a reason. We are also not saved by our good works, although good works are certainly an important part of our lives as Christians.

So what is it then that draws us into God’s kingdom?

Jesus said, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”

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We are saved by our faith. Just a tiny bit of faith will produce miracles. That's the Gospel. We can be saved by a mere cry like that of the wretched man of old when he said, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) That is enough--just a simple "yes" to God. The mistake we often make is the assumption that faith must be of the spectacular variety in order to be valid. It is hard for us to grasp that just a little faith is all we need.

Some of you are old enough to remember that--during the days of Sputnik, the first Soviet satellite--how concerned our national leaders were about our falling behind the Russians in the space race. Arthur C. Clarke, a British scientist, once explained why the U.S. failed in its first space probes while the Russians took the lead.

He writes, "To escape completely from the earth's gravitational field, a rocket must attain a speed which, in round figures, is 25,000 miles an hour. At a fraction less than this speed [the rocket will] fall back to earth. At a fraction more, it [will attain] the freedom of space. The first Army and Air Force shots missed the crucial figure by only about 2 percent, but that was enough. Then came the Russian moon probe, which beat [the crucial figure] by about the same slim margin, and that was enough to take it not merely to the moon but, at the extreme end of its orbit, around the sun, more than 200,000,000 miles from earth, or almost 1,000 times as far away as the moon."

We were behind by just a hair, two per cent, but that tiny gap was enough to delay our efforts for some time.

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Jesus says that only a tiny measure of faith separates believers from unbelievers, but that tiny measure is enough. It would be nice if we could be people of complete and unquestioning faith, but that is hardly possible. Always we will struggle with some doubt. That's human nature. However, even a little faith is enough to receive God's blessings.

The painter, Whistler, once wrote an essay titled 10 P.M. This essay contended that at ten o'clock at night even muddy water gleams with the reflection of light. From London Bridge at 10 p.m. the river Thames, which looks quite ugly during the day, seems to lose its filth as it reflects the glow of the city's gas lights. The surface of the muddy city stream is beautified at night as it sparkles with the gems of light. (6)

That is what happens when we allow that little faith within us to reach out to God. The muddy river is still there. And it will take a lifetime and more of believing and growing to be purified enough for the Crystal Sea of His eternity. But when it becomes 10 p.m. for our souls, when that little bit of faith shines on us, suddenly that which was so ugly is transformed into something beautiful. Just a little faith will do.

For you see, it is not how much we believe in God that makes the difference for us. It is that God believes in us. God created us in His own image, and gave His own Son in our behalf. God's Son showed us the path that leads to abundant life in this world and beyond. And He gives a simple invitation: it is, "Follow Me." It is not through our knowledge, nor through our commitment, that we will join the hosts of heaven, but simply by saying, "Yes, I will follow."

Phillips Brooks, a great preacher from a century ago, once told a wonderful story about his father. He said his father, who was also a pastor, lived on a salary of eight hundred dollars a year, with a family of eleven growing children. It amazed Phillips Brooks that his family lived on so little.

He remembered his father saying once at the table something that made a deep impression on his young mind. Having poured his tea into a saucer to cool, his father was resting his two elbows on the table. Brooks' mother sat opposite him, murmuring, in a sweet, refined, gentle, sad way that the bills were due; that she had no money; that, indeed, she did not see how they could get along; that for her part she expected to die in the poorhouse. At this statement of despair, Phillips Brooks' father dropped his hands to the table, and his eyes sparkled. He said, "My dear, I have trusted God for forty years, and He has never forsaken me; I am not going to distrust Him now."

That woke young Phillips Brooks up. It sank into him. During his earlier life he went through perils of sickness and poverty, and all forms of

limitation and trouble, but he never forgot that scene and that sentence. “I have trusted God for forty years, and He has never forsaken me; I am not going to distrust Him now.” (7)

Phillips Brook’ father knew what it was to follow Jesus. He was saved not by his knowledge--not by his good works--but by his faith in Jesus Christ. And friends, that faith, just a little bit of it, will save us as well.

1. <http://www.moorparkpres.org/sermons/1998/61498.htm>.

2. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974).

3. Peter Hay, *Movie Anecdotes* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 30.

4. Robert A. Raines, *To Kiss The Joy* (Waco: World Books, 1973), p. 13.

5. Edgar Allison Peers, *Behind That Wall* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 103-104.

6. J.B. Phillips, *The Newborn Christian* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. Inc. 1978), p. 168.

7. Toyohiko Kagawa, *Meditations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), p. 50.