

'Faith or Deeds' was one of the great controversies of the early church. Whilst many people claimed that salvation could be attained by good works – those deeds – Paul was adamant that only faith could result in the believer being saved. Today that is very much the basis of our Christian Faith, but often it is not as simple as an either / or question. To explore this today we are looking at these three bible readings – all well known, but what do they actually mean for us today?

We start near the very beginning. The first call from God for faith has been denied by Adam and Eve. They had it all. A beautiful place to live. A god who regularly visited and spoke to them – what would we give for that today – And no concept of sin in their bodies. Until, of course, the serpent convinced them otherwise. This was God's attempt to create companions for himself, and after it went wrong, things just got worse. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel, and Cain, in a fit of jealousy as he thought God was showing favouritism to Abel, killed his brother. We are then told of 9 generations of descendants of Adam, until we get to Noah. And God had had enough: he, "saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" and the result was the flood, and God, in effect, having a second go at creating a faithful people on earth.

After Noah and his family came out of the arc, his son Shem has a son called Arphaxad, who had a son called Shelah, who had a son called Eber, who had a son called Peleg, who had a son called Reu, who had a son called Serug, who had a son called Nahor, who had a son called Terah, who had three sons, one of who was called Abram.

So why have I gone through all that? It was the deeds of so many people that, in effect, destroyed their faith. Perhaps it is just that we don't hear any more about these characters, but did Adam and Eve retain their faith in God? What about Cain? God promised to protect him from people who might now want to kill him, but we are told that in the end, 'Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, East of Eden.' So being faithful to God in those days was vital.

Which brings us to Abram, and our first reading, and the simplest of stories. God said to Abram, 'do this' and he did it, because he had faith in God. And of course that carried on with Abram and his wife Sarai, who became Abraham and Sarah when God confirmed his covenant that Abraham would father many nations – apart from one or two little blips in their deeds, like when Abraham first told Pharaoh, then Abimelech, that Sarah was his sister to save his own skin, and when Sarah didn't believe the three visitors when they told her she would have a baby, but Abraham and Sarah's faith held firm, and, by and large, their deeds backed up their faith.

Let's skip forward now to Paul's letter to the Romans which was our second bible reading, which uses the Abraham story to justify what Paul believes to be the case – that only faith can lead to salvation.

So, in this passage, Paul cites Abraham, who was one of the most respected figures in all of Scripture. To the Jewish audience of Paul's day, Abraham was the spiritual father of the nation. If anyone could claim righteousness, a right relationship with God, by effort, obedience, or heritage—the people Paul was writing to would have known it was him. So Paul asks: Was Abraham justified by works? If righteousness could be earned, Abraham would have reason to boast. But Paul makes it clear: not before God. Before a holy God, boasting evaporates.

Which brings us back to what I said when we looked at the Genesis reading "Abraham Believed God". A couple of chapters later in Genesis we hear this verse (15:6) "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Notice what it does not say. It does not say Abraham achieved righteousness. It does not say Abraham purchased righteousness. It does not say Abraham proved himself worthy. It says he believed. Faith was not a work—it was trust. Abraham simply took God at His word and God credited righteousness to him. The word "credited" is an accounting term. It means to place into someone's account. Abraham's spiritual account was empty—but God deposited righteousness there.

To convince his readers, Paul gives a simple analogy. If you work for wages, your employer owes you. Your pay cheque is not a gift—it is an obligation. But salvation is not a pay cheque: God is not in our debt.

In verse 5 he talks about something very radical, especially to the people of Paul's time: "But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners." It's not the improved who are counted as righteous. It's not the nearly perfect. It's not the spiritually impressive. It's the sinners. This is grace. This message would have been shocking. The religious mindset says: Clean yourself up. Try harder. Do more. Be better. Then God might accept you.

But the scriptures tell us: Admit that you cannot become perfect. Trust the One who can. Faith is not moral effort. Faith is surrender. Faith is saying, "God, I cannot make myself righteous. I trust You to do what I cannot do."

Paul's argument in Romans is building toward the cross. Ultimately, righteousness is credited to us because of the finished work of Christ. Our sin was credited to Him. His righteousness is credited to us. That is the great exchange. We stand before God not based on performance, but on promise. Not based on works, but on faith.

Which all brings us to our third reading this morning, our gospel reading, and in some ways I find this a challenge to what Paul wrote to the Romans. Is Jesus here making a real attack on our deeds?

What I have been trying to work out over the last week is why, if our faith is secure, when our actions, our deeds, cause us to sin, why is Jesus suggesting such extreme actions.

Is Jesus really suggesting that we should cut off our limbs or gouge our eyes to stop ourselves sinning? Well, no. This is a case of Jesus exaggerating what we should do as a means of shocking us into taking our sins seriously.

Take Joseph as an example. In Morning Prayer this week we have been following his story – him of the bright coat fame. To remind you, Joseph was a rather arrogant young man who had two dreams which suggested his brothers would bow down and worship him, and with a remarkable lack of tact, Joseph went ahead and told his brothers about these dreams. Not happy with their little brother, the brothers sold Joseph as a slave, but Joseph eventually ended up in the household of a very wealthy man called Potiphar whose wife tried to seduce Joseph. Rather than give into this woman's desires, Joseph, as the best means he could think of to avoid a sinful relationship, ran away, even if he was naked as Potiphar's wife had grabbed his robe. Joseph

was falsely accused of seducing her and ended up in prison. But in Joseph's eyes that was better than sinning – and there was always the chance of things being put right – as indeed they were.

Joseph was prepared to embarrass himself by running away naked in order to avoid sinning; he spent several years in prison to avoid sinning.

We must take note; we must take our sin seriously – not just a quick prayer to ask for forgiveness, although that is clearly important, but make changes to our lives to stop it happening again.

Let me come back to faith and deeds for a moment, and remind you where this is taking us.

We cannot gain salvation by our deeds – we can only gain salvation through our faith, but, unless we are very careful, our faith can be destroyed by our deeds. Which is why Jesus is shocking us into being so careful about how we live our lives by this gruesome tale.

And when he originally told the parable of the lost sheep, which concluded our readings this morning, that would also have been a very shocking message to give out. These days, this very familiar passage might not have the same impact. Let me explain.

If you are running a sheep business these days and you had 100 sheep and you lost one, then you may well consider a 1% loss to be an acceptable margin in your business. Yes you may try and learn a lesson from your loss, but a 1% loss is probably not catastrophic.

In biblical times, a shepherd was quite often given the job of looking after someone else's sheep, and if they lost one because it ran away, they would have to pay for it, and for poorly paid people that was serious.

The other possibility would be that a sheep had not run away but had been killed by a wild animal, and in that instance the shepherd had to provide a remnant of the sheep to prove what had happened – otherwise he would still have to pay for it.

And let's be honest. Sheep are not always the brightest of animals. They have a tendency to roam, shall we say, and I guess that makes them more likely to get lost, or worse. So this is not an easy job.

But of course the shepherd in the story is God, and God does not want a single one of his sheep to go astray. He does not want us to sin, to get things wrong, to lose our faith, and he will do all he can to bring us back when we go astray. And you know, he sees us all as equals, and that reminds us that we as his church, must always treat all of our church family as equals.

Let's just jump back to verses 10 and 11 of our reading. "Beware that you don't look down on **any** of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father." Jesus, if you remember from last week had been talking about little ones, children, and that we should be like children in our faith. Here the little ones are all of us. And what this is telling us, and be aware of this even if you don't really believe in angels, what Jesus is saying is that God's angels are looking after each and every one of us – equally. I find that very comforting, especially when I get things wrong, and I sometimes feel I need more than my fair share of angels to protect me from myself.

I try and always do the right deeds because that is how I protect my faith, but I don't always succeed. And having angels to help me makes improvement feel possible. So, please, do believe in angels!

Before I finish I feel I have to say this. Faith and Deeds can both be important. I have spoken a lot this morning about the negative effect of certain deeds, but there is a massively positive effect on our faith, and on our church, by the good deeds we do.

We cannot build this church without all the good deeds that people do, and whilst they are not a replacement for faith, good deeds very much build our faith for us. So yes I will be continuing to ask people to do more good deeds than they already do.

I'd like to finish with a passage from the prophet Isaiah, which puts in a more succinct, and clear way what I have been trying to say to you this morning. From Isaiah 53:

Who has believed our message?

To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?

My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot,  
like a root in dry ground.

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,  
nothing to attract us to him.

He was despised and rejected—

a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.

He was despised, and we did not care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;

it was our sorrows that weighed him down.

And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,  
a punishment for his own sins!

But he was pierced for our rebellion,  
crushed for our sins.

He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed.

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.

We have left God's paths to follow our own.

Yet the Lord laid on him

the sins of us all.

Don't let your deeds damage your faith.

Amen