

THE WHOLE SELF AND FAITH¹

Texts: “We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ” (Colossians 1.28).

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12.30).²

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

Poor H.D.! He “went to pieces.” Like many of us, he didn’t “have it all together.” Like many of us, he experienced a lack of unity, a lack of completeness, a lack of wholeness. What a mess H.D. got himself into. His life was a wreck. Poor H.D.!

In a similar way, confusion enters our lives. Personal sin, the sin of others, and physical or mental disability due to birth or accident can cause this confusion. But God has intervened to overcome our personal sin by redemption through Jesus. He shields us from the sin of others by our inclusion in the community of his people, the church. And he rescues us from disability by the power of his Holy Spirit who gives us a new perspective on life. All this, however, comes by faith. Faith is simply trusting God. It is believing that he exists and that he can be trusted every day, every hour, and every minute. The Bible says, “Now without faith it is impossible to please him, for the one who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11.6). Faith brings us back to God after we have tried to cope on our own. Through faith, God empowers us to live in harmony with him, with others, and with ourselves.

¹Parts of this lesson may have been borrowed from a small booklet published many years ago by InterVarsity Press of Downers Grove, Illinois. I have forgotten the name of this source.

²Scripture references unless indicated otherwise are taken from NET Bible (1996, 2019).

No doubt, we live in a skeptical world. Trusting other people does not come naturally. In fact, we applaud others and ourselves for being self-reliant. But we cannot always rely on ourselves, because we are not one hundred percent consistent in our thoughts and actions. A person might say, “I don’t know which to follow—my head or my heart. How can I trust myself?” That’s the inner dilemma. Some try to cope with this problem by relying on sensation, “If it feels good, do it.” Or, “thinking is good but feeling is better.” Or even, “grab all the gusto you can.” Many Christians react to this modern laxness by saying, “Don’t trust your feelings. Satan works through emotions. Shut them off.” Our driving force for living is a burning question, isn’t it? Which do you trust when they are telling you different things—your mind or your emotions?

These two problems—the inability to trust God and our internal conflicts—are not new. With great agony the apostle Paul wrote, “So, I find the law that when I want to do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being. But I see a different law in my members waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members” (Romans 7.21-23). Even for the apostle this problem of inner conflict was a burning issue. But Paul knew the solution—“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7.24-25). This answer may seem simple. But the challenge comes with working out this truth about Jesus in our lives.

What do we mean? First of all, there is the total self. Human personality is very complex. It defies simple analysis. But it might be helpful to consider four distinct and interrelated aspects of human experience—thinking, feeling, choosing, and doing. These are integrated and synchronized, almost automatic, within each of us, so that we seldom

realize any distinction. But the lack of integration can cause psychological or moral dualism.

How does faith relate to each of these and keep us from dualism?

How well do we “do” or practice our faith? Scripture tells us about many who practiced their faith by doing, by acting (see Hebrews, chapter 11; especially vv. 32ff.). The list of deeds is impressive. Faith is demonstrated when we trust God in our doing. To do the right thing requires faith. To do the hard thing requires faith. To obey God requires faith. Lack of faith may prevent us from doing what God wants to bless. Faith gives meaning to actions, and our actions give life to faith (cf. James 2.17).

Failure to act out our faith leaves us vulnerable to human weakness and to circumstances (e.g., “going with the flow”). If we fail to do, to act on the basis of faith, then circumstances will control us. Or we may fall into the human weakness of “just doing for the sake of doing.” Many Christians equate “busy-ness” with living by faith. “Busy-ness” is that scurrying about, trying to find God in anything and everything, usually self-centered living, that fulfills personal needs and fails to take the time necessary to render genuine service. When we equate Christianity with “busy-ness,” often we do or act because we feel we have to, not because we want to. There usually is a lack of satisfaction in this type of “Christian living,” which is a growing weariness that doing more for God will bring spiritual refreshment. This is doing for the sake of doing, without meaning, without significance, and without faith. It is quantity over quality. It is pagan living, which is living without God and without a God-consciousness. Often, Christian leaders fall into the trap of this kind of doing. And a great antidote to this type of living, this type of doing, is prayer and fasting.

Does not scripture condemn this type of living, this type of doing? Colossians 3.17 tells us, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks

to God the Father through him.” When faith is applied to our doing, we serve God because we want to. Our actions become opportunities for us to see the mighty hand of God at work. When we take time to trust God in our doing, thankfulness and positive attitudes develop that energize and encourage us. Faith in our doing unifies our various activities. Faith in doing helps us make sense out of life. Faith in doing gives life a serious and positive goal. It is living a God-oriented, balanced life.

How well do we “think” or contemplate our faith? Most Christians apply faith to their thinking. We emphasize great truths to be believed. Such truths are: “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15.3-4), and that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16.16). These truths, and there are many more, are important. We need to exercise faith in our thinking. This is true because, in our information saturated society, it is easy to fall victim to worldliness in our thinking, and worldly thinking leads to worldly living (cf. Philippians 4.7-9). Yes, doubts about God and his Christ will come, but we should not fear these doubts. We need to use the mind that God has given us. We need to apply faith to our thinking.

One big problem with many is a faulty view of who God is. God is the totality of his attributes, so overemphasis on one attribute, such as love or justice, without understanding the balance gives a false view of who God is. Some see God as harsh and cruel and unwilling to forgive sins. They see God as a vindictive God, but they do not know him as a tender and loving Father. This faulty, unbalanced view of God takes away the freedom that comes by applying faith to our thinking and knowing that Christ died for our sins, that he was punished for our sins, and that God, since he is a just and holy God, does not take lightly the death of Christ for us.

About such faulty thinking, Os Guinness warns us, “For some reason or other a believer gets into

his head such a wrong idea of God that it comes between him and his trusting God. Since he does not recognize what he is doing, he blames God rather than his faulty picture, [not] realizing that God is not like that at all. Unable to see God as he is, he cannot trust him as he should, and doubt is the result.”³ Faith applied to our thinking will help us know who God is, and knowing who God is will help us both know and do what the will of God is (see Romans 12.1-2).

Furthermore, faith applied to our thinking is not a once-and-for-all thing. Faith applied to our thinking is a process, what the Bible calls sanctification or growth in holiness (see Philippians 3.12ff.). The more we learn about God, the more we can trust him for further growth. And applying faith to our thinking opens doors for trusting God in other areas of our life.

How well do we “feel” our faith with our emotions? Most of us lack the expertise to apply our faith to our feelings. We have been indoctrinated with maxims such as “feelings are bad” or “you can’t control your feelings.” To some extent, we live in a no-touch, no-feel society. Consequently, when we are troubled by our feelings we often withdraw from God, and we fail to explore the possibilities for applying our faith. How many days have you spent emotionally upset only to realize at the end of the day that you failed to ask God to quiet your feelings or help you understand your feelings?

Feelings are vital signs. They tell us when things are going well. They also alert us when difficulties are imminent. In this respect, feelings are neutral, neither good nor bad. Like blood pressure or pulse, they tell us what, not why. Even Jesus acknowledged the presence of emotions in his life. He was an emotional person. “For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are,

³Source unknown.

yet without sin” (Hebrews 4.15). “Therefore he had to be made like his brother and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2.17). Jesus wept. He loved. He showed compassion. He was angry. He experienced grief, fear, and apprehension. He was lonely and felt forsaken.

The Bible teaches us to acknowledge our emotions and then make right choices in response to our feelings. For example, “be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on the cause of your anger” (Ephesians 4.26). “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10.28). “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2.15). “Do not let your hearts be distressed. You believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14.1). “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12.30-31). “Be content in every circumstance” (Philippians 4.11). Each of these emotions—anger, fear, love, anxiety, contentment—requires a response in the form of choice and action. This is how faith is applied to feeling. Isaiah 41.10 says, “Don’t be afraid, for I am with you! Don’t be frightened, for I am your God! I strengthen you; yes, I help you; yes, I uphold you with my victorious right hand!” Israel was told how to react to emotion, “Do not fear.” And the reason why a positive response is possible is given: “For I am with you.” God challenged his people to apply faith to their feelings and to control their feelings by choosing a positive response.

At the peak of the “Jesus movement” in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the connection between faith and feelings was compared to a train. Fact was the engine; faith was the coal car; and feeling was the caboose. The unfortunate illustration implies that

feelings are secondary, even unimportant in our lives, and that somehow we can unlatch or unhook our feelings and not do any damage to the orderly progression of the train of life. That view of feelings is not right. Without feelings we cannot know ourselves nor can we know God, our Father, adequately. If we want to use the train imagery, we could say that feelings are the wheels on which the train rolls along on the tracks. Feelings are important for things to progress properly. They are a necessary part of being human. It has been said that “all the circumstances of life—being born, growing as a child and teenager, living as a single adult, being a parent, loving and being loved, and even dying—constitute great learning experiences. The possession of feelings to enjoy and to cope is an important part of that education.”⁴ So the need to apply faith to our feelings and to be able to control our feelings and not allow them to control us is real.

Finally, how well do we “choose” or make decisions as we work out our faith? Human beings are choosing creatures. We really do not have a choice about choosing, since we cannot choose not to make choices. By not choosing, we are choosing to take what is left over. The young lady who could not decide which of five job offers to accept lost the opportunity to work at any of the places of employment. One by one all five jobs were given to other people. By trying not to choose, she was choosing not to work at any of the jobs. Her desire for God’s perfect will for her life, or perhaps her fear of not being perfect for any of the jobs, controlled her, and she made a non-choice choice.

Faith in our choosing says, “I will trust God to help me as I commit myself to one of the possibilities open to me. I cannot adequately predict the future, but I can trust God to help me live with the consequences of my choice.” Two beautiful examples of faith working in choice

⁴Source unknown.

are found in Hebrews, chapter 11. Abraham chose to obey God and went out “to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, and he went out without understanding where he was going” (v. 8). How was Abraham able to make such a choice? This was a choice that would effect his whole family in a dramatic way. Verse 10 tells us that “he was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” For Abraham, this was faith in his doing, thinking, feeling, and choosing. Moses also exercised faith in his choosing. “By faith, when he grew up, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be ill-treated with the people of God than to enjoy sin’s fleeting pleasure” (vv. 24-25). How was Moses able to make such a choice? This was a choice that went contrary to all his childhood education and training. Verses 26-27 tell us that “he regarded abuse suffered for Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward. By faith he left Egypt without fearing the king’s anger, for he persevered as though he could see the one who is invisible.” For Moses, this was faith in his doing, thinking, feeling, and choosing.

Sometimes we fail to choose properly because we are afraid of ourselves, our abilities, or other people. We fail to take the initiative, so we fail to see how anxious God is to help us find solutions to problems. God invites us to choose to come and feast at his banquet table (see Matthew 22.1-14; Luke 14.15-24). But too often we make excuses, come in late, and then have to eat leftovers or garbage. Earl Wilson remarked, “Recently I watched a healthy young man eat bread from the garbage can of a restaurant in Seattle. I do not know his circumstances, but I wondered why he chose to eat leftovers rather than respond to the ‘Help Wanted’ sign on the

front door of the restaurant. Maybe he was afraid of being turned down, or maybe he was running from a troubled family situation, or maybe he was running from God.”⁵

Often we avoid choosing the best, because we fear failure. We settle for garbage rather than partake of the feast at the Lord’s banquet. We mistakenly believe that it is easier to avoid rather than face certain difficulties and responsibilities. We wrongly convince ourselves that it will be easier tomorrow. But applying faith to choice requires self discipline. Remember that all of us choose. Making choices is something than none of us can avoid. The question is: “Will we choose what is best?” Applying faith to choice in order to choose the best involves giving up something or risking something. For example, a choice to go back to school for an adult who has a family requires giving up some financial security. A choice to change jobs might run the risk of failure in the new environment. Choosing to move to a different town, city, or state involves many risks. Choosing to identify ourselves as Christians often runs the risk of ridicule. Choosing to be vibrant in our Christian faith will run the risk of alienating friends and family (see Matthew 10.34-39). So the choices we make on the basis of our faith in God are very important. And the choices that we make today will impact what will happen tomorrow and the choices that we will face in the future. Yes, the challenge of Joshua to Israel is a challenge to us today. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24.15; NIV).⁶ The best choices are those which apply faith to our doing, our thinking, our feeling, and our choosing.

Poor Humpty Dumpty! He was such a wreck. He couldn’t get it all together again after his great fall. If only he had followed Paul’s advice:

⁵Source unknown.

⁶New International Version (2011).

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4.4-9; NIV).