The Importance of Continuing in the Faith
Colossians 1:23

I want to start by sharing 3 quick stories that today’s Bible passage speaks to.

Early on in my pastoral ministry a mother was sharing concern about her wayward adult child. Their grown child didn’t want anything to do with Jesus, God or Christianity anymore. My heart broke for this woman because the heartbreak is real & deep for any believer who has a close friend or family member who has walked away from the faith. But then the story changed. This mom was upset at some of her child’s old Christian friends who had lovingly challenged this grown child. “That just made my child mad. If they would just leave my child alone, if people would just stop trying to get my adult child to believe in Jesus then my grown child will be fine because they will still go to heaven – but now they may even get more upset with God.” This mother didn’t fear that their grown child had turned away from faith & Jesus – this mother feared Christians who might bring the gospel message of Jesus to this grown child & this grown child would respond worse. This mother figured their grown child was fine because of an action they once took when in grade-school at a VBS.

About midway through my pastoral ministry I needed to go confront a gal in the church because of clear evidence this woman was committing adultery. Those times are never pleasant and one goes in great humility & dependence on the Lord simply to give that person a chance to repent. This gal didn’t deny her affair in fact she said it was no big deal to God so why did I care what she was doing. “Jesus has forgiven me of all my sins including the future ones. When I am done with this fling, I will just say ‘I’m sorry’ to God and He will be fine with that. This (affair) makes me happy and God wants me to be happy.”

Then in July I saw some headlines about one of those reality TV shows. I guess one of the suitors wanted some assurance that the bachelorette really believed that it was a sin in God’s sight to have sex outside of marriage. He had changed from his sexually active ways 3-4 years ago after coming to faith. He wanted to know that if the gal really did want to marry him that she wouldn’t sleep with the other guys in the competition first. She was very irate with the question, accused him of being judgmental and admitted she had already engaged in sex with one of the other contestants. “I have had sex. And Jesus still loves me.” It wasn’t a big deal to God. The Internet blew up saying how wonderful this reply was, how it was sex-positive and a lot of other things. So how does true faith work – is the faith that reconciles us with God just a one-time thing. Our passage today reminds us that continuing in our faith is far more important than we can imagine.

PROPOSITION: The importance of continuing in our faith in Jesus is far more important than we can imagine.

I. A clear qualification – continuing in the faith

Colossians 1:23
Last week we focused on v 22. READ. It is essential that all of us be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. As we have seen in previous weeks, without reconciliation we are in trouble—alienated from God, from creation, and from others—enemies of God in our minds because of our sinful actions, that is our wrong behavior. Without reconciliation with the true God we remain captive to the Kingdom of darkness, our sins are not forgiven, and we are not be eligible for heaven. God wants to reconcile us. He is please to reconcile. Jesus, the eternal Son of God who is God come down in human form, sacrificed greatly to provide a way for us to be reconciled. And God has a transformation planned for us that is the highest vision of what any mortal being could ever be or do—The Lord is committed to work in our lives so we can be presented to the Universe one day, holy in God’s sight, without blemish and free from accusation. That is way past any conception of forgiveness we might come up with!

Now we come to a qualification. READ v 22-23. A clear qualification is added to these wonderful promises—"if you continue in your faith". Before our minds race into our particular systematic theology, let’s see what this is telling us at face value!

A. There is no reconciliation without faith “your faith”

The first thing that we notice is that there’s no reconciliation to God without faith. READ v 23a. The prerequisite of faith in Jesus for forgiveness, heaven, reconciliation and eternal life is a constant message of the New Testament. As Ephesians 2:8-9 says “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so no one can boast.” Without that faith that the gospel calls us to in response to God’s initiative in providing the gospel, we are not reconciled to God. My self-effort or my desire can never get me from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Only faith in Jesus alone can bring about that reconciliation. But does God really want to reconcile with us?

D. L. Moody related this incident between his sister and her son (these are Moody’s words from almost 150 years ago):

My sister, I remember, told me her boy said something naughty one morning, when his father said to him, “Sammy, go and ask your mother’s forgiveness.” “I won’t,” replied the child. “If you don’t ask your mother’s forgiveness I’ll put you to bed.” It was early in the morning—before he went to business and the boy didn’t think he would do it. He said “I won’t” again. They undressed him and put him to bed. The father came home at noon expecting to find his boy playing about the house. He didn’t see him about, and asked his wife where he was. “In bed still.” So he went up to the room, and sat down by the bed, and said: “Sammy, I want you to ask your mother’s forgiveness.” But the answer was “No.” The father coaxed and begged, but could not induce the child to ask forgiveness. The father went away, expecting certainly that when he came home at night the child would have got all over it. At night, however, when he got home he found the little fellow still in bed. He had lain there all day. He went to him and tried to get him to go to his mother, but it was no
use. His mother went and was equally unsuccessful. That father and mother could not sleep any that night. They expected every moment to hear the knock at their door by their little son. How they wanted to forgive the boy. My sister told me it was just as if death had come into their home. She never passed through such a night. In the morning she went in to him and said: "Now, Sammy, you are going to ask my forgiveness." But the boy turned his face to the wall and wouldn’t speak. The father came home at noon and the boy was as stubborn as ever. It looked as though the child was going to conquer. It was for the good of the boy that they didn’t want to give him his own way. It is a great deal better for us to submit to God than have our own way. Our own way will lead us to ruin; God’s way leads to life everlasting. The father went off to his office, and that afternoon my sister went in to her son about four o’clock and began to reason with him, and, after talking for some time, she said, "Now, Sammy, say ‘mother.’" "Mother," said the boy. "Now say ‘for.’" "For." "Now just say ‘give.’" And the boy repeated "give." "Me," said the mother. "Me," and the little fellow fairly leaped out of bed. "I have said it," he cried; "take me down to papa, so that I can say it to him." We are the ones who struggle with the truth and reality of our wrongs, God wants to forgive, but there must be repentance which includes both the acknowledgement of what we did was wrong and a step towards change.

B. True faith continues to the end

The second thing we notice about the faith that leads to reconciliation is that it continues to the end. Remember these words are not being written to unbelievers or occasional church goers but to the faithful in the church of Colossae who earlier in this chapter were commended for their faith! Read v 23. If whatever we claim as faith doesn’t last until the end, then we aren’t reconciled – it’s not true faith. True faith is not some sort of momentary willingness to entrust our lives to God or a spiritual instant of surrender or temporary surrender in a crisis. Rather saving faith, faith that leads to reconciliation, is permanent. This is a real challenge and warning to all active believers – in fact it comes right out of concern of the apostle that these Colossian believers may start to believe and follow the false teachers and so be “disqualified” (Read Col 2:18). It is the genuine concern many rightly heard in my first three illustrations. Being “born again” is not a one-time experience but it’s a permanent and enduring reorientation of our whole life that God does. One of the most sobering truths in the Bible is that not all who profess to be Christians are in fact saved or converted by God. Paul seems to be acknowledging that the Colossians are at a crossroads – continue following Jesus or be enticed to follow false ways. He challenges them to continue trusting in Christ and living out the gospel message.

There are actually three time perspectives here. In the past, they were reconciled with God when we came to faith (“has reconciled”). In the future, they will be totally purified. In the present, they were to continue in faith until that day of the Lord – to live our faith out in our daily activities – Continuance is the test of the reality of our faith (which only needs to be the size of a mustard seed) and God’s converting us.
C. True faith is on the established and firm

How should the Colossians continue in their faith? Do we act triumphantly? Do we make lists of our accomplishments? Does going to church or having personal devotions each day prove our faith? Interestingly, outside of saying to continue in our faith, all of the emphasis of “how” is on the object of our faith – God and His promises. READ v 23, “established and firm”. Our Christian faith is to be established or built on a strong foundation – the foundation of Jesus who has proved all He taught by bodily rising from the dead. And it is to be firm – the root word here is to sit – it is to sit firmly in a saddle on a horse so you aren’t easily knocked off. The key is not the amount of faith or how strong our faith feels – to continue in our faith is to center and found our lives, our beliefs, our statements and our actions on the true God and His ways – including the gospel and truth of the Bible. Don’t judge your faith by what you do or feel at the moment, but how you respond to your thoughts and actions in the days to come. Like that little boy – Was his first confession real? You know that that word for word repeating his mother’s words? What was real was his response that so agreed with the words he refused to say on his own because of his sinful pride, but now so agreed he wanted to immediately publicly say them to the Dad and I’m sure he said them to the mom many times in the days to come. “Your right, what I said was wrong and I want to live different – thank you for helping me.” What is firm and established about true faith is not that we won’t have doubts, will always do the right thing or always feel good – what is firm and established about true faith is that it is built on the revelation of the One true God.

D. True faith holds on to hope of gospel

So true faith is not about how we feel, that we always do everything right or always have a great attitude – true faith makes its foundation that which will never change! Another way to see this balance is our next phrase. READ v 23. When we start to downplay the hope held out for us in the gospel and we are tempted to put our hope in something else – that is a danger sign. True faith holds on to the hope of the gospel – again not because we always feel hope or think triumphantly – but simply because we do not give up on the fact that God loves us, that we can be forgiven, that we can go to heaven, that God’s way is best, that the Lord is always with us, that God won’t waste our pain, that we can join God in eternally significant work, that God is going to transform us into the character of Christ, that we will live eternally without pain, that righteousness & justice will be restored – the list is long! Don’t let go of that hope – don’t let the false claims of popular culture, personal wants or false teachers be your hope!

E. True faith is in the gospel (good news of Jesus)

Finally, so there is no confusion about the faith they (& we) are to continue in, the Bible restates the content of that faith. READ v 23. True faith has a specific content to it. It is not simply belief in a higher power. True faith that will endure is in the gospel or the good news of Jesus. This is the message they and every Christian since has heard – that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who came down to take on human form to
show us God’s way more clearly. Jesus came to provide a way for sinful, imperfect people to be forgiven and qualified for heaven by dying on the cross as a payment for our sins. Since Jesus was sinless, His death provided the sacrificial basis for reconciliation with God and a genuine personal relationship with Him. And God gave us solid proof in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead! This message is not just some localized claim but it is for the whole world! This gospel is not something Paul made up but he has been so transformed by it that he now willingly serves and sacrifices for the gospel and the true God of this universe.

F. But my faith wavers at times and I definitely lose hope at times

But you may be thinking, my faith wavers badly at times and I definitely lose hope at times. Absolutely! That is why the importance of faith is what our faith is in, not how much we have, how passionately we feel or how much we do. It is also why we must always humanly remember this warning – if our faith doesn’t continue to the end – if it is not there at the end, we aren’t reconciled.

II. The twin truths about faith – BOTH are important

A. God warns of leaving the faith

God wants us to understand the incredible importance of continuing in our faith in Jesus. This isn’t the only strong & real warnings from God about leaving faith in Jesus. Let me quickly share just 4 more from 4 different authors.

- Jesus says in Matthew 24:12-13, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”
- Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:1, “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.”
- The writer to the Hebrews says in 3:12-14, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.”
- Peter says in 2 Peter 2:20-22 “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.”"
Don’t try to explain away the very important warning that if we do not preserve in our faith we can have no confidence that we, or someone else, will be in heaven. There is no turning away from Jesus that is OK; there is no persistent willful sin that is OK. EVER. We are not saved by continuing in our faith, but continuing in our faith demonstrates our faith is real and God has actually converted us – because salvation is all a work of God.

B. God assures of His work in our faith
(Jude 24; John 10:28-29; Ephesians 4:30; Romans 8:38-39)
But we must also equally hold strong to the fact that God assures us of HIS WORK in maintaining or continuing our faith.

- Jude 24, “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—” God’s power is what is able to keep the believer from falling – we are all weak & fallible!
- Jesus in John 10:28-29, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” We are firmly in the grip of both the Son and the Father.
- Paul in Ephesians 4:30 reminds us God is the One who has sealed us for that future day. “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”
- And from Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

For most of us, it helps us to see any faith we naturally have is pathetically insignificant to the challenges around us. We give our small actions & stands of faith to Jesus for Him to multiply like He multiplied the 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed 5,000. God is the One who will bring us through! God is the One who strengthens our faith so it perseveres.

See it matters not whether you say someone who has turned away from Jesus was never really a Christian to begin with or that they were a Christian who willfully left God and His offer of salvation – in both cases, we can have no assurance at this moment that any person who has turned away from Jesus is going to heaven – none! That category doesn’t exist in the New Testament, just in the minds of modern Americans. Historically, both Calvinists and Arminians (two terms commonly referred to for two different perspectives of what is happening when someone turns from the faith) – BOTH the Calvinist perspective and the Arminian perspective historically COMPLETELY AGREE that the church goer who walks away from biblical belief is not currently “in Christ”, “God’s spiritual child” or “reconciled with God.” They disagree on what happened – but they agree on the need – that wayward
person must hear the gospel message, repent of their wrongs and surrender to Jesus as Savior and Lord. God doesn’t allow us to be the ultimate judge of whether someone will go to heaven or not — God gives us two very special truths we are to always hold on to right now so we give ourselves and others the best chance to take God’s right narrow path in life rather than following the popular wide path to destruction! God is actively at work to help us preserve faith when we feel we have none. And it is never OK or not a big deal TO GOD when we willfully sin or turn away from active faith in Jesus. Don’t miss the point of today’s passage — this is a real warning to people who have outwardly shown commitment to Jesus. Make sure you don’t give up on Jesus — and if you do there is no assurance you have been reconciled with God, so get on your knees immediately, repent of both the sin and taking God’s ways lightly.

God has come up with the most dramatic and exciting escape the world will ever know. He has taken you and I, who were prisoners in the Kingdom of darkness, and transported us to the Kingdom of Light. He has given us forgiveness, a new nature and a special future. This is not because of all the great things we have done, but simply by His grace and mercy. Keep holding to your faith in Jesus and His ways no matter what the obstacles, challenges or pressure. And remember when you or I are weak, Jesus is strong! We give you pathetically insignificant faith and watch God do miracles with it!