

How to Build Your Faith (Part 3)

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Calvary Chapel Ontario

What are the tools that God has given us to keep our faith strong, healthy and strong?

That's what we've been talking about for the last few weeks. We've been taking a short break in here in our study of Matthew's Gospel. We've been highlighting just four of what I'm sure many tools God has given us to keep our faith healthy and strong, and I'll put them once again up on the screen for you, just so you can be reminded.

- The Word
- Prayer
- Fellowship
- Obedience

They are The Word, Prayer, Fellowship, true koinonia, and Obedience.

We're going to be dealing with fellowship today. Before we do, let's pray.

Jesus, we love You. We need You. You are the teacher. You are the instructor. We ask for You to bring insight and wisdom and understanding and to guide us and direct us in the way that we are to go. Fill us with Your Spirit. Teach us, Lord, Your Word. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Each week, before I've been talking about one of these tools, for lack of a better word— and it's really a dumb word, but it's the best I can come up with. Before I talk about these things that God has given us to strengthen and create greater health and so forth in our faith, I've been talking about why it's important for you to even care that you have a healthy growing faith. I've been talking about— hey, you need to have a healthy growing faith. And you could reasonably say to me, why?

Well, I want you to check out a passage with me. First of all, on the screen from 2 Corinthians, chapter 4. I want to put this there so we can all read it together. Paul writes and says this—listen to this; this is great:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Therefore (he says) we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away (speaking of this human physical body), yet inwardly (speaking of the inner man, the spirit, the soul, and so forth, he says) we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

I want to leave this up for just a little bit so you can be looking at it as I chat with you just for a second about this because you can see the subject of what Paul is saying here is not losing heart. That's really the topic of what he's dealing with, and he even shows us the secret of not losing heart. We say, not losing heart—you can refer to that in a lot of different ways: losing your faith, having your faith shipwrecked, whatever the case; he calls it in this particular case, not losing heart.

The secret of not losing heart is given to us in this passage, and he says that it's because someone's faith is so healthy and so strong that they can actually see not with their human eyes but with the eyes of faith, that the challenges and the trials and the persecutions and the difficulties of this life are actually—get this— “*light and momentary.*”

Do you know what that takes to see that? It takes the eyes of faith. You can't see that with human eyes. You look at your problems with human eyes, and guess how they look – anything but light and momentary, right? They look heavy and eternal, right? But with the eyes of faith, Paul says, you can actually see the issues that you're going through in that way as light and momentary.

Not only that, but the eyes of faith also help us to do something else. They help us to see that all these problems we go through and all these challenges we endure actually work for us what he calls an “*eternal glory.*” That's something else that you can't see with human eyes. You can look all you want but you're not going to see the eternal glory that can come as a result of the problems, issues, trials, and so forth, that you're going through.

Then he ends the statement by showing what the person with a healthy faith is able to do. And what he says at the end of this thing is: “*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen...*” Meaning what you can see with your human eyes. That's not what we're looking at; that's not what we're focused on; that's not what we're fixated on. But rather, he says, we are looking at what is unseen.

And then he even tells us why: because everything you can see with your eyes is just passing. It's going to go away; it's temporary. But what is unseen with the human eye but seen with the eyes of faith is eternal.

Okay? It's a great verse, isn't it? I mean, it's a great passage. I love this passage. But I always look at passages, and I'm a pragmatist from the word go—meaning that I look at things and say, okay let's give this thing legs. Why isn't it walking? What's wrong with this passage?

Well, I'll tell you what's wrong with it. For most Christians today, they have absolutely no experiential understanding of what this thing is talking about, what it means to be so healthy in their faith that they can look at life, they can look at challenges, they can look at difficulties in a different or new way. Most Christians are so undernourished that all they can frankly see is what's on their plate or what's right in front of their eyes. And it overwhelms them. Usually, things happen in their life, and they go into a tailspin because that is what they've got their eyes on, and they're not fixated—or they're not set on things that are unseen.

You see, what Paul is describing here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 is a healthy faith, you guys. That's what that is. That's why you and I read verses like that, and we go, that's nice. That's nice. That's a nice verse. Never experienced that in my entire life, but that's nice. I mean, I can look—I mean, it's poetic. It's beautiful. It sounds like a wonderful goal, but I can't relate. Right? That's the fact of the matter.

Let me remind you, just again, what the definition of faith is according to the Word of God. It's from Hebrews chapter 11:1:

Hebrews 11:1a

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

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He's meaning with your eyes but what we do see with eyes of faith. Now faith, he says, is confidence—and that's part of the two key parts of this single verse.

There are two key phrases in here. The first one is “*confidence in what we hope for.*” Are you confident in what you hope for? You might say, well, maybe, sometimes.

Do you know that we misunderstand what this means? This is not talking about what you hope for in this world. This is not talking about what you hope—I mean, like I really hope I get that job. I really hope they give me a raise, I really hope on Saturday the weather's nice, I really hope this person likes me. That's not what he's talking about when he says “*Faith is confidence in what we hope for.*”

The hope that he's talking about is the hope that comes into our life as a result of the promises of God in His Word. We see the promises of God, and we put our hope in them. Faith is the confidence in the hope of those promises. It's not in hope what you and I hope for just in daily life, living, and junk like that. It's not.

And that's why people get all discouraged because they put their hope—and they say, I have faith, but they have faith in their desires, in their hopes, not the things that come from the Lord - the hope that is generated through the promises of the living God.

You see, that we can hope in; that you can take to the bank. When God says something, when He makes a promise, you can say, boom, that's mine, and I'm going to put my hope in that. So faith is the confidence of that hope in the Lord's Word, and so forth. That's what faith is.

The other phrase from this verse is that faith is also, he says, “*the assurance (about what?) about what we do not see*” - again, speaking with our human eyes.

We, Christians, we're the craziest people in the world. We go around the world and we can see things people can't see with faith. We see realities that other people can't see, but we can see them with the eyes of faith, and we have an assurance.

We know that when we are absent from the body, we will be present with the Lord. In fact, we know that we know that those who have gone before us, who are now absent from the body, are present with the Lord. But have you ever seen them present with the Lord with your eyes? I haven't, but I have an

assurance that they are there, and I have assurance that you and I will be there, too, when that happens.

You see, that's this ability that God gives us through faith: to see and to know and to be assured. And so, faith, as you can see from what I'm sharing with you here, sees past the things of this life that call our attention constantly, and it sees into the promises of God, and it rejoices in those promises.

That's why, Christians, we have joy in this life. If your hope is in this life and that's where your joy is rooted, yikes, you got a major disappointment coming down the pike. If we have hope for this life, we are to be pitied more than all men – if our hope is only in this life. Because this life disappoints, doesn't it? All the time, every day. Almost every day, there's something in life that will disappoint you. Our hope is not in this life. This life is passing away. Our hope looks beyond, and so forth.

As Paul said to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:7:

2 Corinthians 5:7

For we live by faith, not by sight.

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So our lives are not lived by what we can see with our human eyes. That's a verse we need to remind ourselves of on a daily basis. We are to live by faith, not by sight.

It's a healthy faith, a growing faith that can do these things; not an undernourished, malnourished, unhealthy faith. An unhealthy faith can't see into the promises of God and lay hold of them and rejoice in them because it's so weak. It just doesn't have that capability.

So, have I encouraged you, first of all, a little bit in just why we even need to be concerned about a healthy faith? Why you should be concerned? We've been saying— throughout this series, we've been asking the question: How's your faith doing? If we put a faith-o-meter on you, where would the needle go?

Well, I told you that today we're going to talk about one of the tools that God has given us to build up our faith – and it's fellowship, or koinonia (κοινωνία) is the Greek word that is used in the New Testament that we translate, fellowship.

You might be wondering, how in the world does fellowship apply to building up or having our faith be healthy and so forth?

Well, the first thing we have to do when we talk about fellowship is we have to redefine what we recognize as fellowship in the body of Christ. Because to most Christians, fellowship is getting together and hanging and eating unhealthy food, I suppose, or something similar to that. It's just hey, let's want to come over to my place and hang, and we'll just have some fellowship. And it means like turning on a movie and eating popcorn and hey, break out the chocolate, man. This is a time of fellowship. Something like that.

Well, I would like to show you what true fellowship in the Word of God is supposed to look like, okay? I'd like you to turn with me in your Bible to Acts chapter 2. So open up your Bible there, please, to Acts chapter 2.

The reason I'm having you go to the Book of Acts is because I believe that the Book of Acts portrays for us an early Christian church whose faith was healthy. I believe that they were healthy. And in order for you and I to get back to a place of health related to our faith, then we need to go back and look at the New Testament. We need to look at the early church and say: What were some of the things that they were doing? What was their health producing? What kind of things do healthy Christians do?

Well, if you're in Acts chapter 2, skip all the way down to verse 42. Luke is amazing here; gives us a great description of the early church. Verse 42 and following, he says:

“They (talking about the early church) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (and that's the Word of God to you; they called it the apostles’ teaching; we call it the New Testament or whatever. But what else did they devote themselves to?) to fellowship (to koinonia), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (And look what it goes on to say:) ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.”

And then Luke goes on here to define their fellowship even a little bit further in the next verses. Here's what he says:

“⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. (Did you catch that? Every day.) They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere

hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

I read that for you once again because I believe it's a description of a healthy church. I believe it's a description of people with healthy faith.

But I want you to notice something about this description. Did you notice how many community/communal words are in this passage? Words of community are words that, I don't know if you're aware of this, are quickly—we are losing them from our vocabulary.

Do you know that? Do you know that the current generation of young people use less community-based words in their vocabulary than those of us who are maybe in our—considered the baby boom, whatever? And even our generation above us, they spoke more of community than even do we. Words that relate to community are going out of style; and maybe - just maybe - that has something to do with why we aren't experiencing the healthy faith that the church ought to.

Look at this passage again. Look at all the community words. Let me— as I go through it again, it says: *“They (the very first word “they” – not just a person but they) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to koinonia, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (And it says) everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles and all the believers (it says, were what?) together, and they had everything in common.”*

I mean, this was the first commune, you guys. It had its problems, I'll grant you that. But it says:

“They sold their property and possessions and they gave to anyone who had need and each day they continued to meet together (look at these community words) in the temple courts and they broke bread in their homes, and they ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

I don't know how anybody could read a passage like this which describes the life of the early church and come away with the idea that our faith is something that ought to be private and solitary. Have you ever talked to somebody, and you start talking to them about the Lord, and they go, well, my faith is just private. Really? Have you ever read the Bible? The whole concept of community just permeates the Bible - the sense of we are the body of Christ. I see community written all throughout this passage and so many others.

The church, the body of Christ, is meant to be together. Why? This is the point: so that we can build up one another's faith. That's where fellowship comes into play as a tool to build up our faith to a healthy level. That's the reason for koinonia.

I'm going to just shotgun to you a whole ton of Scripture passages for a minute, okay? I'm not trying to overwhelm you by this. I just want you to see— and I'll do these rapid-fire on the screen here, but what I want you to see is the overwhelming evidence of God's Word that talks about the body of Christ focusing in the early church on strengthening people's faith. You ready? Here we go.

Acts 14 – here's the first one:

Acts 14:21-22a

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Acts 15:

Acts 15:32

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Acts 15:40-41:

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Acts 16:5:

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Acts 18:

Acts 18:23

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Romans 1:11, Paul writes:

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I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

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Colossians 2:2:

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My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart...

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1 Thessalonians 3:2:

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We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,

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Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

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Hebrews 3:13:

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But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

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I could have gone on, you guys. This is just a sampling of the overwhelming emphasis of the New Testament that says this is what we're here for, this is what we do. We come together to encourage one another so that when you walk out of whatever meeting or group or study or whatever that we're in, you walk out of here encouraged – and that means your faith is stronger for having been there. That's what we do. That's what we're supposed to do.

Breaks my heart when people say, I walked away from church today and I was so discouraged. I hope that never happens here at Calvary Chapel Ontario, but if it does, or if it ever did, I'd be discouraged because it is a complete betrayal of what we're here for. It is the opposite of what we're here for.

This idea of encouraging one another so permeated the teachings of the Apostle Paul, that when he wrote to the Corinthian church to talk to them about spiritual gifts, there's a lot to say about spiritual gifts.

We love talking about spiritual gifts. Do you know what Paul's main emphasis of spiritual gifts was? 1 Corinthians 14:12, he said:

1 Corinthians 14:12

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That was his focus. That was his emphasis. If you want to be spiritually inclined, why don't you look for things that are going to build people up in their faith instead of trying to just make you look spiritual? This was Paul's heart. And not just Paul's heart. Paul just happened to write the majority of the New Testament that's why we're focusing on a lot of his stuff. But as you can see, Luke wrote a great deal of the references that we made there. It was just the heart of the New Testament church: building up people's faith.

So what is the key to a fellowship that builds up people's faith? You might say, well, Pastor Paul, I've heard of people going to church and actually getting hurt and never wanting to go back again. That happens, and I would be a liar to say that it didn't. And we've probably, all of us, met someone who has some story—and I've gotten, I mean, I have been hurt by people. You can't imagine I can do this for 30 years and not have been hurt by people. I have, and I have hurt people. I've seen people get hurt, and I've seen people take up an offense, and I've seen people break fellowship. It's always a tragedy but it's because we're doing at those moments in time, unfortunately, the opposite of what we ought to be doing.

And I'll show you here what we ought to be doing. It's this little key that Paul the Apostle gives us about what ought to mark our fellowship that actually makes it a thing to build up our faith. It's a little small statement that you can miss if you read by it too quickly. It's from 1 Corinthians 8, the latter part of verse 1. It goes like this:

1 Corinthians 8:1c

... knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

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Or as the New American Standard Bible (NASB) puts it:

“Knowledge makes you arrogant (I like that too) but love edifies.”

Do you know that the most powerful thing that you and I can add to the application or the understanding of what fellowship means is the element of love? When you and I think about what it means for the body of Christ to come together in true koinonia, if we don't have love, like Paul says, then we're just getting together for nothing.

Do you remember when he said in 1 Corinthians that love is really the focal point of what really makes everything we do and say meaningful, worthwhile and powerful? And Paul tells us in this little scripture here in 1 Corinthians that knowledge actually puffs people up.

So many times, we come into fellowship to show off our knowledge, what I know. Hey, I want to impress everybody with my knowledge. It doesn't help anybody. It doesn't build people's faith up. It's when we really, truly love one another, when we learn to love one another.

And the reason people get hurt in church is because we're not loving people like we should. We're not laying our lives down for people like we should. We're doing, in fact, the opposite. Now I understand sometimes people just take up an offense because they're primed and cocked to just take up an offense. Life has gone that way for them, and so it becomes a hair trigger in their lives, and there's sometimes very little you can do to stop it.

But that does not take away the idea that you and I ought to be people filled with the love of God, because when the love of God is present in our gathering, there is a work of the Spirit among us to build up faith like nothing can when we're really loving each other.

Guys, we need to learn to love one another, and here's the point: I'm not sitting and harping on you and saying, come on guys, we got to do better. This isn't like a locker room talk. Get out there and fight hard to love your brother and sister, or something like that. Do you know who teaches us how to love one another? It's the Holy Spirit. He's the One who teaches. He shows us how to love one another.

What we need to do, you guys, instead of trying to grit it out or grunt it out in our own personal strength I'm going to love you. I'm going to love you even if I have to kill you, at least you might be dead, but I'll have loved you to the last—that sounds like a pretty fleshly sort of an attempt to love. What we, you and I, need to do is we need to come to God and say, Lord, teach me to love. Teach me to love my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. You show me what love is all about.

Because you see, the love that you and I are to have for one another is to be patterned after His love. We are to love as we have been loved. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven, and so forth and so on. And so, He is the standard and He is the teacher. He is the equipper, the One who empowers us.

You got somebody in the body of Christ who's hard to love? Sure, of course you do. They're all over the place. You might even be one of them. But you know what? What are you going to do? Just give up? We can't ignore each other. Good grief, we're going to spend eternity together. You watch those people that you ignored in this life, God's going to put your house right next to theirs for eternity! Better work it out now!

Yeah, you're going to wake up—well you're not going to wake up, you're going to come out of your whatever. You know what I'm saying. I see you're trying to talk about heaven like I know what it's going to be like, but I'm just saying, we need to be people of love.

Here's what I think we need to do. I think we need to pray. Let's start right now. What I'm encouraging you, what I'm exhorting you as the body of Christ, and I'm exhorting myself right along with you, that we need to dedicate ourselves to the ministry of fellowship with love.

Because, when we do, we will gather like this, and people's faith will be strengthened and they will walk out of a meeting like this or any other group or meeting that we have going on, and they'll go, yes, I'm stronger for having gone there.

My faith is renewed. My heart is strengthened. God is on the throne. He is in charge. He is sovereign and I am going to put my faith in Him. Because that's what faith is.