

Persisting in Our Faith

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, in Matthew's Gospel from the Bible, let's see what Jesus says about that. This is reading from Matthew chapter 6. Therefore do not worry, saying, What will we eat? Or what will we drink? Or what will we wear? For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things. And indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Notice that last sentence. Strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So far we've seen that God commands us to love Him as part of the greatest commandment that He's given us. We've also seen, just then, that striving for His kingdom is much more important than stuff like food and clothes. Okay, we've looked at God's commands and we've looked at things.
- [1 : 0 8] What about people? What about other people in our lives? How important are they compared to God? In Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, one of Jesus' disciples pointed out the amazing sacrifices that they had made in order to follow Jesus. Listen to this passage from Mark, chapter 10. Peter began to say to Him, Look, we have left everything and followed you. Jesus said, Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for My sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields with persecutions and in the age to come, eternal life. Those who follow Jesus are part of God's worldwide family. As I've said to some of you before, and I apologise if you've heard me say this, I'm an only child. I don't have any biological brothers or sisters. But those of you who are Christian people who trusted the Lord Jesus are my Christian brothers and sisters. And I hope you're happy about that, but you are my Christian brothers and sisters. And it's more important to follow Jesus than anyone else. And yet what we've just read from the Bible shows that there are rewards that Jesus gives us for following Him.
- [2 : 4 1] Rewards of Christian brothers and sisters, the Christian family right across the world. You'll notice that Jesus also said, But there will be persecutions if you follow me. So, we've seen that to love God is more important than to love anyone else or anything else. That striving for God's kingdom is more important than what we eat or drink or what we wear. And the third one we just looked at, following God and His Son Jesus is more important than following anyone else. Now, there are stacks of other Bible verses that we could look up, but the message is the same. God is the most important person in our lives. He wants to be the most important person in our lives.

He should be number one in my life and that's something which I seek to make Him, not always successfully. And I hope you strive to do that too. But anyway, when we look at that list that Vaughan had on the overhead for us, we can see that a lot of the stuff on that list is from God anyway.

Music is a gift from God, even loud music. In Australia, we have great opportunities to be educated, so school and university, they are part of God's provisions to us, our families, hobbies that we enjoy, our work, freedom, sport.

[4 : 0 6] Horoscopes aren't from God. The Bible speaks quite clearly about astrology and how quite unchristian and ungodly that that is. Money, the provision to make money, to be able to be employed and to earn money, that's from God.

And love, God is the source of love. So all of the good things on that list are from Him anyway. So it makes sense, doesn't it, that God should be number one in anyone's life because a lot of the good things will just logically follow.

Is He number one really in your life? If He isn't, He can become number one today if you just let Him. So let's go back to our two questions we had at the very start.

We've answered the first one. Let's look now at the second one. How can I keep then God at the centre of my life? How can I keep it and have that as number one?

How can He be the number one friend in our lives? How can we hang in there with God? Well, I'm going to briefly list just a few things that will help all of us stay on track with God.

[5 : 2 0] And I'll speak about each of these fairly briefly. First one is praying. Prayer is simply talking to God in the same way that you talk to your best friend.

You don't have to say thee and thy and thou. You don't have to kneel. You don't have to be at church to pray. You can be anywhere and at any time. You can't have a relationship with someone unless you communicate with them.

Prayer is our way of communicating with God. Listen to what the Bible reminds us about prayer. And this is from John's first letter. And this is the boldness we have in Him.

That if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the request made of Him.

Even Jesus needed to pray and talk to His Heavenly Father. How much more then do we need to do it if Jesus Himself needed to talk to God, His Father?

[6 : 2 7] And as you pray, you'll see God at work in your life and in the lives of others. The second thing that will help us hang in there with God is to read the Bible. And Christian people believe that the Bible was inspired by God.

That is, God used the minds of the Bible writers to write down what were, in effect, His words. And they're now preserved for us in the book we call the Bible, which is actually a collection of 66 different documents.

Listen to what one part of the New Testament says about the Bible. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

I think we actually need these words of God in the Bible just as much, if not more, than the physical food that we eat each day. Jesus said that man and women does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth.

But it's not simply adequate just to read the Bible or hear it explained in church. We need to obey it. If you're daunted by the Bible, it's sort of like a big book, and you think, gosh, how do I read the Bible?

[7 : 52] Just ask an older Christian person how you might get into it and begin to understand it. There are little booklets published that can help you do that. It's not a dusty old book to be left on the shelf like some kind of good luck charm.

It's a book that can help us in our complex lives at the beginning of the 21st century. But you need to open it, and you need to read it, and you need to obey it.

The third thing that will help us hang in there with God is being involved in a good local church. We've talked about the importance of praying and reading the Bible, but we need the support and encouragement of other Christian people if we're to hang in there and grow in our faith.

Occasionally, I talk to people who feel God's like a million miles away, and they complain they don't feel as close to Him as they once did.

In just about every case, these people have decreased their involvement in their local church. What is a good local church?

[9 : 03] A good local church is one that regards the Bible as God's supreme written message, as I mentioned before, to us as human beings. A good church is one that seeks to tell others about Jesus and to reach out to them with His love.

And a good church is one that's centered on Jesus Himself, not on the minister or the youth group or the music or the worship or the fabric of the building, beautiful though this building is.

It's centered on Jesus. Members of a good church show genuine love and concern for each other. Now, of course, no church is perfect.

A church is full of sinful human beings like me, but they all seek to work together to serve God and the world at large. It's really easy, isn't it, to complain when some aspect of the church goes wrong or you get hurt.

And that does happen. As I said, we're sinful people and people in a church congregation do occasionally hurt each other. We have the wonderful resource of forgiveness that we can exercise when that happens.

[10 : 11] Sometimes people whinge when their needs are not being met. Rather than complain, seek to be an active agent of change. Listen to what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said from the New Testament part of the Bible.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Another thing is to remember the certain irrefutable historical facts of our faith and God's promises to us.

The Christian faith isn't just some sort of silly myth or some fairy tale that people have been stupid enough to believe through the centuries and we're all just a bunch of gullible people.

Not at all. It is based on actual historical facts, events that really happened, recorded not just in the Bible, but in other ancient documents as well.

[11 : 20] It's based on Jesus Christ, God's Son, a real figure of history, of whom there is not just biblical evidence, but as I say, ancient documents, archaeological and other evidence as well.

Jesus was born, he lived, he died and he rose again for us. You and I can't run away from the fact that these are real historical facts and even secular historians can't deny them.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to a bunch of Christians at a place called Corinth. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to keep us, then to the twelve.

So there are historical facts that we can hang on to. We can also hang on to God's promises. God makes some wonderful promises in the Bible, and sometimes we're not even aware of them.

Listen to a couple of these great promises that God promises those who trust in him, and he invites all of us to trust in him. Listen to what he promises those who do.

[12 : 47] The first one is from Paul's letter to the Romans. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

God wants to save us from the punishment that we deserve for our sins, and he sends Jesus, who died on the cross, to take that punishment for us. He enables us to be reconciled with him if we trust in Jesus.

Another one from the same letter. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Sometimes we think that God's like a great big giant with a great big boot, and he just wants to go, pow, and squash us under his foot.

There is no condemnation for those who trust in Christ. God doesn't condemn you. He loves you. He sent his son to die for you. Don't condemn yourself.

I do it. I often have a low self-esteem, and I think about all my faults. But God doesn't condemn me, and so we shouldn't condemn ourselves or each other either. And there's that great promise of God's forgiveness, which Jesus' best friend, John, wrote about.

[14 : 05] If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If you say to God, look God, I want to turn away from bad stuff I do, the promise is, God forgives you, just like that.

You are completely forgiven, and your sins are washed away. God also promises to be with us forever if we trust in him. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Not even our own physical death will separate us from God's love. That's why often the funerals of Christian people are great occasions for rejoicing.

Sure, it's sad that the person has died and their family will grieve over their loss, but there's that certain hope of life with God forever. It's a wonderful assurance, and often the difference between the funeral of a Christian person and someone who's not a Christian person.

There's just three more verses I want to share with you because these are wonderful promises, and often I think as Christians we go around like beggars because we just don't realize these wonderful things that God has for us, these wonderful riches that he wants us to enjoy.

[15 : 40] This one's from Psalm 27. If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up. In another version of the Bible, this says, Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will receive me.

That's a great encouragement for those of us who might be young and have non-Christian parents. Even if your parents can't quite understand why you follow Jesus, and you pray for them hopefully and ask that one day they would come to know him, God is still there for you.

You have a heavenly father who is there for you always. And that's what the next verse says too. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.

That's Jesus' promise, the very last verse of Matthew's Gospel. Well, the last one is from the book of Revelation, and this is a wonderful picture of what it's like to be in heaven.

And this was written by Jesus' best friend John. Revelation, the very last book of the Bible. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals.

[16 : 54] He will dwell with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more.

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. for the first things have passed away. I don't know where your home is or what you regard as your home.

It could be where you're going to go tonight. It could be your room. That's your special space where that's you and you've got your posters up and that's really what you're on about. Maybe it's in a town somewhere else that you're used to live in and you regard that as home.

It could be another country perhaps. For the Christian person, they aren't really what we'd call our home. Our citizenship, our home, is in heaven with God.

That's where we'll be forever if we trust in him. That's our true home and our real home. We're just passing through this world and God wants us to enjoy his love here, to trust him and to pass through to be with him in heaven forever.

[18 : 05] Well, there's a few, maybe a few, a lot, of wonderful promises that we can confidently claim and grab onto from God. God doesn't wait for us to pull our socks up before he says, okay, I'll give you that stuff.

He just says, these are my promises to you. Trust in me and all of those are yours. It's better than winning a raffle or a grand prize or Tatsaloto. These are wonderful promises that are just priceless and they last forever.

And if you want to hang in there with God, don't rely on your feelings. Whether we feel close to God or not can be influenced by all kinds of things such as how much sleep we've had and what we've eaten, how fit we are and what else is going on in our lives.

None of those things can change those facts and those promises from God if we trust in Jesus we can know even if we don't feel it we can know that we have an eternal relationship with him forever.

Don't rely on your feelings. Don't let your feelings get you down. There's lots of factors that contribute to them. Have faith in those true certain historical facts and if we do that we can claim those great promises that we've just been reading about.

[19 : 27] Feelings are fickle they'll come and go. Don't trust your feelings. Trust the facts and trust in Jesus. The last thing I'm going to say is to hang in there with God seek to tell others about your Christian faith.

Going public about the fact that you trust in Jesus can really help you to hang in there. The fact that you've been open and public about it. When my wife and I got married here about three years ago it didn't happen in the vestry there with all the people here where no one could see because we were embarrassed about it.

We did it publicly. People knew. God knew. People here knew that we'd made promises to each other that we would seek to love each other and care for each other and that was our intention and our desire.

If you go public about your faith that will cement your true desire to serve God. Don't be a closet Christian. It can be scary being public. It can be embarrassing.

You can lose some face but try and tell someone that you are putting your trust in Jesus. So, to conclude, God is the most important person in life.

[20 : 37] We need to hang in there with him and we've just looked at different ways as to how we can do that. Let me finish by just asking Olive to read three verses from Hebrews chapter 12 and then I'll pray.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of weaknesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. Let's pray.

Let's talk to God. Thanks God that you give us so many great and wonderfully good things. God, we just had a list which contained many of them.

God, help us not to forget that all the good stuff that we have comes from you. God, sometimes it's really hard to keep you as number one in our lives. There's so many other pressures and influences.

[22 : 04] Please help us to try and keep you at the centre of everything we do. God, thanks for the opportunity to learn about some different ways we can do that. The fact that we can talk to you, we can read your Bible, we can be involved in a good local church, we can claim your promises and other things that we looked at.

Lord, help us to realise that we can put our trust in you and know that you will always be with us. Thank you God for this wonderful reassurance and thanks for the chance to recommit our lives to you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.