

Sunday 9th September
Fixing our eyes on Jesus – what is this?

Last week I spoke about Christ and Christ alone being our vision. It is the practical outworking of what it means to 'Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and all of your strength.' If you look up the word in the Greek, all means, guess what, our all. I recently compared our attitude today to a bride who turns up for her wedding with multiple grooms. One who can give her this, and another who can give her that. Jesus does not tolerate any other suitors! What would you think, husband, if at the dinner table on your wedding day, your brand new bride turned to you and said, 'look at that bloke, I fancy him!' Or wife, if you're new husband sat drooling over your brides maid! I am a minister, I know it has happened, but it is not a good start to a marriage wouldn't you agree!?

This is an important subject, because many, many people have been disappointed and have made ship wreck of their lives, lived in frustration and misery because they try to live as half-hearted Christians. This is so sad and pathetic. It is like a person who is living on the bread line walking around Harrods every day, unable to buy anything, but just looking, longing and making themselves miserable. There is no salvation in anyone, anything or anyplace but in Christ, so what is there to look to other than Him?

Sadly, history and experience shows us that people put all sorts of things as a vision for life. Some spend their lives trying to build a better mouse trap, others trying to catch a bigger fish, others want to go higher or faster, when eternity is beckoning. Others want to be rich or powerful or beautiful, some ministers want to build the biggest church or show every other church how to do this, but guess what, in three score years and ten, we leave it all behind. The only thing we get to take with us is what we have received from looking to Christ, that and that alone! So why waste our lives looking for stuff that won't last, when we could be gaining what will last. Jesus told a parable about this. What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but lose his soul? What will it profit? Nothing. What will he lose? His soul to an eternal hell!

I am not saying that God does not give big visions to people. The Wesley's, after they were converted, vowed by God's grace to change the face of England, and they did. However, note what they said, by grace. We get the vision of God by having Christ alone as our vision. Think about that one until we see the difference between changing England, and by the grace of God doing so. I am not splitting hairs.

However, what does it mean to look on Jesus, to fix our eyes on Him?

It means to look at who He is.

What He has done.

What He has promised, and what He has told us is the way to benefit from this looking.

The first three things to look at lie in the sphere of the Scriptures and the illumination of the Spirit upon them. Knowledge alone is insufficient. David in Psalm 119 speaks of

laying up God's word in his heart and not only his head. It begins in the head in our rational ability. This is what regular reading of the Bible is about. We are to engage with the Scriptures in Bible reading, Bible study, at house groups and with the sermon. In John, Jesus prays that God would sanctify the believers by the truth, and then expands the explanation by saying that, 'Thy word is truth.' This is why the Bible is so important, read, studied, preached, it is God's appointed means of making us holy. The word is the fuel and the Holy Spirit sets it on fire within us to burn up the dross, to cauterize the wounds, and purify us as gold and silver is smelted and purified. Books won't do it, DVD's won't do it, fasting won't do it, even prayer won't do it, unless the word is there!

The Spirit and the word come together in meditating on the word and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the word is turned into a life giving force within our hearts. When the Spirit and the word combine, prayer will automatically be our hearts response, and holiness and love will be the fruit that develops within us and which will flow out of our lives. Have you ever wondered why the Epistles of Paul always start with a theological section, and then a practical section follows? It is because truth always should be the fountain of our acting. We should serve the Lord out of what He is making of us, and not out of our minds or just as a response to a need. Read the biographies of the Christian men and women who made a difference, and you will always find that they were people who had their eyes on Christ first and foremost.

Once again, let me encourage you to buy a good hymn book. Hymns are better read and thought about than sung. Meditate, think, read the hymns to see all the joys and struggles, the hardships and the victories of Christians across the ages. Look especially at the hymns that were written in times of revival, these are meaty! I say read the hymns, because many people are more into music or performing than they are into Christ. Anything that masks the truth is not our soul's friend. Used correctly all the things I mentioned can be navigation aids, but the truth is the chart, the map.

What does it actually involve us in if we are to fix our eyes on Jesus? The answer is simple. We fix our eyes on Jesus by faith. Perhaps you will tell me that this is a cop out, and that it must be harder than that, but faith is the way. However, if we think that the path of faith is an easy option, or an easy thing to do, then we do not understand faith as it is illustrated in the Bible, the life of Christ and the life of the saints.

Acting on faith is the way by which we fix our eyes, our attention upon Jesus. I have said that faith is the first grace that God gives us when we become a Christian. However, He does not give us all the faith that it is possible for a Christian to have, at least not at once. We are encouraged to use what God gives us, and as we act on it and use it, it grows and becomes more muscular. The passage in 2 Peter 1 verse 3-11, speaks of this. God gives the growth to faith as we make every effort to add to it. Think of the person in training. The more a person trains, the faster they get, the stronger they get, but if they stop, they lose the strength and the speed quite quickly! Use it or lose it. It is like physical training, fitness seems harder to gain, and easy to lose! We train, but it is a process beyond our rational control that produces the increase of strength. As we

act on faith in Christ, in His word, in His promises, it is the Holy Spirit that causes the growth.

How is faith made to grow? Usually by resistance, trouble and by being challenged to our core. When things arise in our lives, usually and sadly, the first reaction is to try and avoid the trouble or challenge. We do this by turning to anything or anyone else to see if it or they can relieve us. However, the moment we do that, we have taken our eyes off Christ, who by the way, has sent or permitted the situation to arise, for the purpose to correct us and show us our absolute need of Him. He does this out of love for us and for our good. Who said faith was easy, it can test us to what seems to us, a breaking point.

Let me illustrate this from the account in Luke in Chapter 8, and verses 40-56. This is the account of Jairus and his daughter, and a sick woman.

Read this passage and note the things we are told. We are trying to get under the skin of Jairus to consider his situation and how it felt and looked to him in the light of Christ's word to him.

The prolog of the story has four crucial pieces of information. We are told first what he was, what he did, and then why.

Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue. The synagogue was the building and organized religious order that the Jews adopted while in captivity and which continued after they returned to the land. It was an important entity, so a ruler of the synagogue was an important position. Jairus was one of the upper class of Jews, an important man, a pillar of the Jewish community, and a part of the very fabric of Jewish worship.

It does not say it, but the fact that he came and fell at Jesus feet implies that the whole Jewish religious order could not help him in the situation he was facing. For a Jewish ruler to fall at anyone's feet was an act of almost unheard of humility and abasement, especially to Jesus, an unqualified rabbi! Then we read that he begged Jesus to go with him. Asking is one thing, but falling at Jesus feet and begging Him was quite another. This man was desperate. I think he was shaking and sweating and in tears when he did it. Would Jesus come or not? He was at his wits end, why? His only daughter was dying. In those days there was no A&E, NHS 24, antibiotics, drips, or anything else which has saved so many of our lives at some stage or the other. People could die of a hundred things that we have a pill for. These people lived daily with the sights and sounds of death around them, so when this man Jairus said his only daughter was dying, well, she was.

Can you imagine how Jairus felt when Jesus moved away from the crowd to go with him? Did he allow himself a moment of hope? We don't know what went through his head. I only know that whenever I have been in an accident, the sight of the Paramedics brings a moment of comfort, then the pain comes on us again. Joy of Joy, the master, the healer, the raiser of the dead, the provider of food is coming, perhaps all is not yet lost!

Then disaster. Jesus stops and says the stupidest thing Jairus has ever heard! Surrounded by a jostling crowd, every one of whom wants to get a closer look at Jesus, to be beside Him, to touch Him, He stops and asks, 'Who touched me?' Worse comes, a woman comes and falls at His feet. She is in the way, she has stopped Jesus from coming to his sick daughter, and Jesus is talking to her, and she has a story to tell! We are told that the woman was trembling, she was nervous overawed. That is not a good combination when one is trying to explain things. This account of the woman possibly took a while!

What is going through Jairus head at this point? We can only speculate, but perhaps Jairus has a religious moment. An unclean woman has touched Christ, hence He is now unclean. Has He been disqualified from doing any mighty works because of this ceremonial uncleanness which Jewish law would assume had defiled Him? (However anything unclean which touched Jesus did not make Him unclean. He made it clean. However the Jews have still not understood this.)

Then there was that worrying thing Jesus said. 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out of me.' I wonder what that did to Jairus? I could imagine a number of thought all flashing through this experienced Jewish ruler's mind. Power, what power, the power to heal my daughter, has this woman taken it? Is there any power left, or is that it gone?

This must have been a dark, frightening time for Jairus, the clock was ticking and his daughter would not live for long. 'Get this stupid woman out of the way, hurry up Jesus, but if I say that, will He get cross and refuse to come, O that stupid woman, what is an ill woman compared to a dying daughter, my daughter? Could she not have waited a little longer, and touched Jesus after He had attended to themore important matter? We are not told any of this that I have speculated about, but Jairus was not humming the tune to the song, 'Peace perfect peace'! Any of this and more could have been going through his mind.

Then it happens, the worst, his darkest fear, a moment of living nightmare, a messenger comes from his house. There is no way to break bad news except by saying it. 'Your daughter is dead,' he said, 'Don't bother the teacher anymore.' This came as a hammer blow to Jairus mind, heart, soul and spirit. Numbness, grief, anger, weariness, the sense of failure, and the stupidity of falling at a man's feat and pleading. There would be consequences to pay for this humiliation, but for now, she was gone, his darling daughter, the little one for whom he had given up his reputation, was gone. Anyone who has had a bereavement knows how all sorts of thoughts and feelings collapse on us at once. The world had come to an end.

As an aside, why is it that when things go badly wrong, people say, don't bother God. God does not get bothered, He tells us to bother Him, to cry to Him day and night, to give Him no rest, to call to Him in the day and moment of trouble. The messenger was trying to help, but he got it so wrong. Christ loves it when we bother Him until we feel

embarrassed to ask for more! Read the account of Abraham's prayer for Sodom in Genesis. What about Moses praying for the Israelites when they had done the golden calf thing. Forty days and nights, and Moses saw the people spared. Bother God, please do, and encourage everyone you know to try to bother Him with prayer! We bother God on Wednesday evenings together at 7pm. Well, some do.

The next thing that Jesus says seems to be totally insufficient for the moment. Jesus looks at him and says to his face, 'Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.' Ten words in the face of all that had happened, what do we make of that?

When Jairus pleaded with Jesus to go and heal His daughter, his request was out of his need. He did not have a promise or a Biblical promise to go on. There is nowhere in the Bible where it says that we can ask and He must do the healing we want. However now Jesus had given Him a promise from His own lips, 'She will be healed.' However, Jairus had something to do. He had to quell his fear and believe that what Jesus said to Him would happen, even though every nerve in his body and every cell in his brain was screaming that his daughter was dead.

The fight is on. What will he do, walk away, sad and defeated, or act on faith? Will he look away from Jesus to the horrible reality of his emotions, his thoughts, the facts, or will he fix his eyes on Jesus? He had a promise from Jesus. He was not making this up, it was not wishful thinking that he was called to do, but to look to Jesus, and to fix his eyes on Him. That is faith acting in the worst of days and moments, that is what faith looks like, feels like and how it is acted upon!

This is not the only nitty gritty example of faith in the Bible. Abraham had a situation that required slow burning faith because the outcome did not happen as quickly for him as it did for Jairus. Romans tells us that having been promised a son of his own, he hoped against hope, and the son came in his old age after it was too late! Hebrews 11.verse 11 explains this. Read the verse, and you will see that what Abraham did was keep his eyes fixed on Christ. And not look at all the stuff about him!

There is also the incident when Peter walked on the water. Matthew 14 verse 30 tells us that he walked on the water at Jesus invitation, but when he saw the wind, he began to sink. The implication here is that while he was looking into the eyes of Jesus, all was well, but the moment he took his gaze away from Christ, he began to sink. It is no different for us. The moment we lose sight of Christ, or become distracted from Him, we sink! This is especially true when trouble or opportunities come. It seems so rational for us to get caught up in other things that are probably good in themselves, but not at the cost of taking our eyes from Jesus. Birthdays, holidays, busyness in job, hobbies, with people, all these legitimate things become enemies of our souls, if we drop our prime duty of fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Let me make a bold statement. Every sin, every trouble we encounter is either the result of losing sight of Christ, or being distracted from looking to Him because we turn our

attention to trying to fix things ourselves! Don't look at the wind and waves, look to Jesus.

What then was the outcome of Jairus story? We will not think about the scene that greeted him when he got home. The mourners were doing their thing. There used to be professional mourners, and they would most certainly have turned out for an important man such as Jairus!

The outcome was the raising of the little girl, and the most tender snack a child was ever given! Jairus had his daughter back from the dead. This happened because of who Jesus is, and because, despite all that assailed him, he fixed his eyes upon Jesus. That is faith. That is the same faith that we are called to walk in. Was it easy, was it pleasant, was it an emotional stroll in the park. It was not, it was grown up growing, not sentimental twaddle that many think is faith. Read the stories of the Gospels, they are there to show us who Christ is, what He is like, what He promises, not to entertain us, but to show us how to act on faith, grow, get more faith, even the faith that can say to a mountain, 'shift' and it will.

One last thing, and this is easily missed. Who was it in the darkest moment called Jairus to look in His face? It was Jesus. He did not let Jairus walk away, but called to him to look to Him. Jesus is still as tender to call us to place ruthless trust in Him in the darkest moment. All will be well, not because of us, but because of Jesus who loves us, has pity and compassion on us, and calls us to believe and trust when there is no hope of any good coming our way. All this is because of the grace of God.