Understanding Commendation in the light of the Gift of Faith (Heb.11.2b)
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1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
2 For by it the people of old received their commendation.
3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Introduction

Let us begin with a review of Hebrews 11.1 before we work further with 11.2 this morning.

In 11.1, we read: **Now faith is the substance of things hoped for**. We have to think objectively about this opening verse that sets the stage for the entire chapter. The question that immediately surfaces is this: how can faith be one in substance or essence with God's promises regarding the future? What does this mean? It means that faith is a promise; it is something hoped for, expected, and anticipated. This leads to the important implication that faith is God's gift.

Since faith is one in essence with what is promised, it must itself be a promise. It does not just embrace the promises; it is itself something promised to us for the days yet to come. This context has us look back to the past and ahead to the future. As we look back (per the direction of 10.32-35), and look ahead (to things hoped for, per 11.1), we are to recognize that our faith is the gift of God's promise, and He is faithful.

This teaching about faith (Heb. 11.1) is the first encouragement in the "tenfold" encouragement that we have in this entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews. We have another encouragement in 11.2 where the encouragement is not based on what faith is but on what faith receives. That is, it is encouraging to know that OT saints received God's approval by faith. To get a handle on this encouragement, it is helpful to discuss two questions: a) how can we make sense of the commendation of *sinners*? We covered that last week. And b) how can commendation make sense *in light of the gift of faith*? This second question yields the title for today's message: "Understanding Commendation in Light of the Gift of Faith."

We will develop this theme by reference to a circular complaint that floats in the air here. It goes like this: if God is honoring people for something He gives them, then He is really honoring Himself (which seems egotistical) and the actions of people are meaningless (which seems hopeless). In other words, how can commendation make sense in this context? We can only go so far with an answer, but we can cover the following points: circularity, paradox, and discipleship.

1A. Circularity

Up front, a comment is in order with regard to the "circular" aspect of this complaint.

On one level, why should we think that there is something wrong if God seeks and advances His own honor through His dealings with people, including giving honor where honor is due? After all, His great end in creating and sustaining all things is His own glory; this is an emphasis in both Paul and our writer to the Hebrews: **For from him and through him <u>and to him</u> are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.** (Rom. 11.36; **For it was fitting that he, <u>for whom</u> and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering** (Heb. 2.10).

Regarding egoism, God does not have too high of a view of Himself. Having excessive self-esteem is pride and arrogant according to Scripture: **I say to everyone among you <u>not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think</u>, but to think with sober judgment** (Rom. 12.3). However, God knows all things including all things about Himself. He has perfect self-understanding. He has perfect and exhaustive self-knowledge. So, He knows correctly that He is the greatest and best of beings. He knows that He is due all honor and glory and He rightly promotes His own glory as His chief and ultimate end.

His purpose in the creation and governance of all things is God-centered. It is for Him; it is for His glory. And it is a comprehensive purpose that sweeps across the history of the very universe in its breath and touches the history of you and me in the person of Christ our risen Savior. He is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last.

All things past, present, and future serve the singular end of God's glory. His glory must be His chief and ultimate end. It is His most valued and sought after goal. It is His ultimate purpose that does not serve as a means to some further end, but it is that which is sought for its own sake and for God's own delight. It is the final end where all subordinate ends finally come to rest.

So, having true knowledge of His greatness prevents any prideful overconfidence or overestimation. With us, pride, thinking too highly of oneself, is a recurring reality, but not for God. As a matter of fact, He rightfully takes delight in the reflection of His glory in and through all things created and directed to His goal.

Therefore, the "circular" complaint that God honors people for faith that He gives them so that He is the one to whom all honor belongs misses the point of every fact of created existence, namely, that all the facts of creation and the entire unfolding of those facts in history is for His glory. Naturally, that has to include the gift of faith He gives us and commends in us.

2A. Paradox

The suggestion that our faith would be meaningless, hopeless, and cease to have moral worth puts one thread of biblical truth in opposition to another. One thing we cannot do is lose sight of either God's gift of faith or our responsible and praiseworthy action in the exercise of faith. If we do, we will be using Scripture against Scripture, making logic rule over the text, and failing to live under God's authority trusting Him regarding all threads of truth.

What we have before us another biblical paradox.

Let us brainstorm a little regarding the idea of a paradox and relate it to these teachings about faith as God's gift and faith as our responsibility.

1) In a paradox, there are (at least) two claims or beliefs. Let us call them threads.

2) Both are in Scripture; they are threads of clear biblical teaching, clear threads of truth.

3) They seem to contradict each other. This means we have difficulty seeing how these threads fit together in the whole fabric of truth. It means that human reason has trouble accepting one of the teachings because of the corresponding paradoxical thread. An intellectual tension exists in a tenacious and profound way.

4) There is danger we must avoid. The danger is that we damage one truth or the other by our reasoning. Our logic may inform us that both threads cannot be true so we will try to eliminate one or the other. We may take a biblical truth and use it to deny another biblical truth!

Therefore, to avoid straying to the left or right, we must conclude that paradoxical thoughts transcend our thoughts like the heavens transcend the earth. It is *impossible* for us to fully comprehend them because they come to us from the incomprehensible God who transcends all that He created!

Now, back to faith as God's gift along side His commendation. We have two threads of truth here: faith as God's gift and faith as our responsibility. Scripture gives us both; both are clear doctrines. They seem to contradict each other, but we know both are true because God tells us that both are true.

Thus, we are wise to keep the idea of paradox firmly in mind as we try to explain the relation of God's gift and our responsible exercise of faith. This means that we will go as far as we can with all that God has disclosed, but, as Calvin put it, we will stop inquiry where the Holy Spirit closes His holy lips (*Institutes*, 3.21.3).

3A. Discipleship

We can speak to this gift/commendation tension in some measure by reference to a divine pedagogy (God's teaching method). The Lord is training and nurturing the faith of those set free from bondage in sin. By regeneration and the giving of a new heart, we are set free for righteousness, but walking in newness of life (Rom. 6.4, 18-20) is something we learn in stages over time (Heb.10.14, **For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified**). We must, and actually do learn how to walk in newness of life; that is we learn more and more how to live by faith. Our faith advances in stages. We become aware of the process by Scripture and experience and the Spirit prompts us to better use of the means of growth. He does so by conviction and by providential acts of discipline. Note four *balancing* points.

1) Thus, we actually grow in *our* faith and its exercise in the heart and in action (in *our* hearts and in *our* actions). This heartfelt action is at every step the work of the Spirit by which *we learn how to trust and obey*. We learn that we are to pray for an increase of faith and we thus pray as the disciples prayed, Lord increase our faith (Lk. 17.5). We grow in deeper awareness of the weakness of our faith and we pray: **I believe; help my unbelief!** (Mk. 9.24). The need for increase and the awareness of weakness are relevant at all stages of our walk with God, whether we are new or seasoned Christians.

2) Thus, our faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. How a Christian grows and the tasks he is able to do are the results of the work of the Holy Spirit; His decisions rule. The sons of God are led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8.14).Still, we are responsible for every action we make and every step we take. We are blameworthy for every failure (for each one is our own doing) and praiseworthy for every act of faith for what we *learn* in learning how to trust and obey. Like the saints of old, by faith (that the Holy Spirit gives us by His gracious nurturing), we receive God's commendation, and the "well done" of His approval (well done thy good and faithful servant).

3) It is very practical and down to earth. We learn that having a submissive and willing spirit is the way of forward progress. We also learn that if we fight with God's way of teaching, nurturing, and leading us, then we make our own way more difficult. There are set backs on this road of sanctification, but the way is sure because the Lord uses both our backward steps as well as our forward steps to teach us His will and to lead us in the way everlasting. Not a single step is outside of His leading us to the good works He has ordained for us (Eph. 2.10, **For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them**).

4) God is at work. He encompasses our paths and upholds us wherever we go, no matter how fast or how far on the "wings of the morning" (Ps. 139.9-10). He helps, saves, keeps, and loves us. Nonetheless, we cannot sit on our hands because we are secure in His love. We cannot look at the gift of faith and conclude that we will have it whether or not we put forth any effort to cultivate it. If we do this we are grabbing onto only one of the intertwined threads of truth. We have our hold on God's sovereign working and certain promises for the future, but we do not have a grip on the corresponding thread of truth, the unquestionable fact of our duty as God's appointed means. If we focus only the tread of comfort and neglect the thread of duty we do so arrogantly as if we know better than God. We then manifest the pride that God despises; it is to the humble that God gives more grace.

Conclusion

1) Humility

This very doctrine of the commendation of those who exercise faith that God gives is a call to a humble use of logic. Consider the illustration of a rope over a pulley hanging in front of you stuck half way down a deep well. You see two ropes and cannot see that they connect or how they connect to form a single rope. To use the "ropes" to save your life, you must grab both at the same time. If you grab one to the exclusion of the other, you will plummet to the bottom of

the well. To receive the bread of life from Scriptural paradoxes for your benefit, you must believe and live *by both ropes of truth*, even if logic tells you that using one to the exclusion of the other is easier or makes more sense.

When we fail to embrace all that God has given us, we are asking for trouble. When we fail to submit our thoughts to His regarding paradoxes that He has revealed (at the same time that much about them remains concealed) we commit ourselves to perpetual frustration. There can be no satisfaction of mind, heart, and soul without submission to what God has revealed, to all of it, and to it in the form that He gives it to us with many things left to Himself. Some things belong to Him and not to us; we must respect that fact and not try to go beyond the horizon of His revelation. As Moses tells us, **The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law** (Deut. 29.29). We can know that some things are above our thoughts like the heavens are above the earth. We can and should be aware of the fact that there are a number of biblical paradoxes (intractable tensions), and we may make some gain in understanding interconnections on some of them more than on others of them. But out greatest energy must be to trust the Lord with regard to what He has revealed. Trust Him that what He has chosen to give us is sufficient. Trust Him in this way and if you do you will put forth great effort to understand what He has revealed better and better…to know Him better and better in a personal way. This is the intimacy of communion with God through Christ in which we submit ourselves to Him as the beginning of all true knowledge.

2) Duty

To have growth in faith, we have duties.

We need to study and embrace the entire paradox before us. We need to know the sure promise of God and we need to heed the clear call to duty in the commandments of God. We cannot play off one thread of truth against another. After all, they are connected as one in the same fabric of truth and God knows perfectly how they are connected. We may be ignorant of the connection, but we must trust God and His word on it. Both are true and we need to lay hold of both for knowledge and conduct with clear understanding and practical obedience.

We must learn them in an initial way and then keep on learning them more fully. Prayer is one of the means that should be quick to embrace: **Lord, increase our faith; Lord I believe, help Thou my unbelief**. Teach me to pray and teach me how to pray. All things are within a divine pedagogy. There, gladly, we have to learn and live by faith.

3) Encouragement

Is it not encouraging to think (contemplate, know) that God patiently and faithfully teaches us how to receive His approval, that He takes us down the path of learning how to receive His commendation? He does that by upholding and nourishing our faith to enable us to live by faith. Thus, *our* faith grows in stages for *His* glory.

What a marvelous teaching this is! We can live by faith and receive the approving word of our great king. We can do so because Jesus secured our restoration by His death on the cross. That restoration includes our journey from the present to glory by a discipleship that is His doing for He is the teacher training and nurturing us each step of the way. We can live by faith and receive His approval and we will do so because He is faithful (Heb. 10.23, **he who promised is faithful**).

> **May we fall down before the majesty of our God to learn at the feet of Jesus our great high priest by the teaching of the Holy Spirit; may we learn how to glorify God more and more by the faith that He gives us in the schoolhouse of discipleship. To the triune God be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.**