

Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

Three Pillars of Jesus' Faith

—by Marc Turnage

If I asked you to boil down the three principal spiritual disciplines of your faith, what would they be? Take a moment and write them out in order of importance, with number one being the most important.

Today, we want to talk about the three pillars of Jesus' faith, so it will be essential to compare our list with His. Even the Old Testament boils down the things that God wants from us into simple practices. For example, Micah 6:8 says, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

This tendency to bring all of the commandments into a bare essence continues in the centuries between the Old and New Testaments. We hear of a Jewish sage who lived a couple of hundred years before Jesus, who said that upon three pillars, the world is founded:

- 1) upon the Torah,
- 2) upon the temple service, and
- 3) upon deeds of loving-kindness.

It's not only important that he outlines three, but the order of the three, as well. The first one is the most important for him: the Torah—meaning the study of the Torah—then Temple service, then deeds of loving-kindness.

In Matthew 6:1-18, we find the three pillars of Jesus's faith, all connected because He says, "Beware of doing this in front of men. Rather, do it in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

What are the three? Righteousness, prayer, and fasting. Fasting does not just mean abstaining from food, but it was connected to the act of

repentance—repentance tied to a hope to bring about national redemption. So again, righteousness, prayer, and repentance are Jesus’s three pillars.

What does He mean by the term “righteousness”? To understand this, we need to step back into the world of the Old Testament. You see, words like “righteous,” “to be righteous,” “to make righteous,” and “righteousness” in the Hebrew language were all relationally defined. The principal relationship was between God and humanity; God then defined what it meant to be righteous as being someone who did righteousness. But there’s another aspect to this—a relational aspect between human beings.

The doing of righteousness makes one righteous. That’s how the Bible looks at it. The breaking of that relational quality, whether it’s between us and God or us and another person, is what the Bible calls sin. We need to keep this relational aspect of righteousness in our minds, because what happened within the development of the Hebrew language and the Jewish faith between the Old and New Testaments is that the term “righteousness” became a euphemism meaning “charity” or “almsgiving.”

This understanding still exists today in the Jewish community. If you go into a synagogue, you will find a box at the synagogue’s front with the word “righteousness” written on it in Hebrew. If you go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem today, beggars will come up to you and say “righteousness” in Hebrew. They’re asking for alms.

We see this in Matthew 6:1, where Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” Take note that when Jesus outlines the three principal pillars of His faith, the very first pillar is, “How I relate to other people.”

We’ve talked about this before, that Jesus belongs to those who say, “Between me and God stands you, and in the way that I relate to you, God will relate to me.” But now go back to your list of three principles of your faith that you wrote down a few minutes ago. Was number one something connected with your relationship with God? Notice the difference with Jesus. For Him, “how I relate to another like myself”—even someone poor or in need—becomes the foundation of my relationship with God.

The three pillars of Jesus’ faith are charity/almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (repentance). Once we tune into this, we see it repeatedly in the Gospels. After Matthew 6:18, Jesus instructs his disciples, “Do not lay up treasure on Earth, rather lay up treasure in heaven.” Matthew’s version of this does not give us the answer to how we lay up treasure in heaven. But we find the parallel in Luke 12:33, where He says (paraphrased), “Sell your possessions and give alms and make for yourself purses that will not wear out and lay up treasure in heaven.”

Remember the story of the rich ruler who comes to Jesus and says, “What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?” When Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, the ruler asks, “Which?” The commandments that Jesus then highlights—don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t bear false witness, don’t steal, honor your father and mother, love your neighbor as yourself—all pertain to how we treat other people. The rich man responds, “All of these I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” Jesus replies, “One thing you lack. Go sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven.”

Both Jesus’ statement in Luke about laying up treasure and the story of the rich ruler detail that the way we lay up treasure is through giving charity. Why do we do that? Why would we care about laying up treasure? We find this phrase in Jesus’ contemporary Judaism, and the idea is that you lay up treasure against the day of necessity, meaning the day of judgment.

For example, in Matthew 25, Jesus describes the separation between the righteous and the unrighteous. What’s the difference? He says to the righteous, “For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you cared for me.” And the righteous will say, “When, Lord have we seen you like this?” And He says, “Inasmuch as you’ve done to the least of these, you’ve done it unto me.”

But then to the wicked, He says, “I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was naked, and you didn’t clothe me. I was sick, and you didn’t visit me. I was in prison, and you didn’t care for me.” Then the unrighteous will say, “When Lord have we seen you like this?” And He says, “Inasmuch as you have not done to the least of these you have not done it unto me. Depart from me.”

That’s a hard word, but the difference between the righteous and the unrighteous was how they related to other people created in God’s image. Jesus is consistent in the Gospels in the fact that He expects His followers to be marked by their charity. In Matthew 5:20, He even says, “Unless your righteousness”—and now we know what that term means—“exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

This is not about being philanthropic, just filling a need for the greater good of humanity. In our charity towards others, Jesus sees not only a spiritual benefit to them but also to us. The way I care for others is my acknowledgment that they bear the image of God.

Do you see the image of God in the people you walk past every day? I’m not just talking about your family or friends. I’m not even just talking about your enemies or those people who get under your skin. What about the ones on the edge of society? Do we see them as bearing

God's image? Do we look at another person and see, by our care for them, an opportunity to serve God? That's what Jesus expected of His movement. When He outlines the three pillars of His faith, He institutes the foundational pillar as charity—how I relate to others.

Question Review the list you made at the beginning of today's teaching. What actions do you need to make this week to bring your three pillars in better alignment with Jesus?

Family Chat Who can you serve today and expect nothing in return?

Prayer Starter Jesus, please give me Your eyes to see those around me the way You see them. Empower me with compassion through Your Holy Spirit to care for them, love them, and provide for their needs without expecting anything in return.

Take Action Do something for someone else in need this week. You can join Serve Saturday, in person or virtually. Sign up by texting **SERVESATURDAY** to 88000 and mark your calendar for the next one in your community!