

BELIEF MATTERS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 19, 2018
based on Psalm 1:1–6; Matthew 7:15–20***

The sermon today is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, Why Believe. We have considered during this series the classic “proofs for God”—a series of logical arguments for why a person should reasonably believe in God; and we have considered further what true belief is. {prayer}

In seventeenth century France, Blaise Pascal developed one of the more unique and memorable arguments for why a person should believe. In France at the time, gambling was very popular, and Pascal himself was quite involved in the gaming world. He once helped a prominent gambler figure out why he was losing at a dice game (in the process helping to develop modern probability theory), and he invented the roulette wheel. So when it came to putting forth an argument for why people should believe in God, Pascal played off of the popularity of gambling and put forth an argument that was essentially this:

Consider the biggest bet of all time. It is the wager as to whether God exists. Suppose you are quite uncertain as to which way it will go—maybe God exists, or maybe not. It is like flipping a coin, and you do not know which side will come up. But in the case of God’s existence, you must place a bet. You either believe in God, or you do not. You have to choose; and in this case, you are betting your life. Now consider what the outcome of this wager might be. If you bet that there is a God and you are right, you gain eternity, because you have staked your life on God. If you are wrong, you gain nothing and die; but if there is no God, you were going to lose your life anyways. On the other hand, if you bet that there is not a God and you are right, you still gain nothing; you die. If you are wrong, you inherit death when you could have inherited eternal life! So in this wager, you have everything to gain in betting on God, and nothing finally to lose. The rational person, said Pascal, will bet everything on God.

This whole argument is now known as Pascal’s wager. It is a line of argumentation entirely different from that of the classic proofs for God, which all consider what a human being can reasonably know about God, and what a person can infer from all the evidence at hand. Pascal’s argument is based not on the grounds for belief but on the results of belief. The reason to believe, he argued, is because your belief will have major eternal consequences.

Most people who believe in God, especially those who have seriously considered the proofs for God, will insist that belief in God has a foundation far more solid and sure than the outcome of flipping a coin! But Pascal’s wager can serve to turn attention to a very important reality—belief matters. Belief matters enormously for one’s destiny.

In the Bible, one of the most succinct declarations of the consequences of belief in

God can be found in Psalm 1, which declares, “Blessed is the one— אִישׁהּ אֲשֶׁר־יֵרֵא—whose delight is in the ways of the Lord. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and its leaves do not wither. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1)

This short Psalm details four central consequences of faith for the believer. The believer, first of all is “blessed”—the first word in the Psalm. This word in Hebrew (*ashar*) can also be translated “happy,” but it means much more than a fleeting feeling. It indicates a state of wholeness, well-being, and spiritual health—those qualities that make for true and lasting happiness in life.

The second consequence is that the believer is “like a tree planted by the water . . . whose leaves do not wither.” In the semi-arid lands of the ancient near east, where a tree could easily wither in a drought, this image of the tree planted by water suggests that the believer has a never-ending source of strength and sustenance in the face of trying times. The believer is not necessarily spared adversity, but can find—through believing—the power to persevere through it.

The third consequence is that the believer “bears fruit”—a Biblical image for doing good. Believers are inspired and empowered to bring real blessing to the world.

Finally, believers have an ultimate destiny that is the opposite of the destiny of the wicked, who “will perish.” The implication of the Psalm, which is brought to great clarity and emphasis in Jesus, is that those who have faith in God will inherit an eternal reward. As Jesus said, “Everyone who hears my word and believes in God who sent me has eternal life.” (John 5:24)

These four consequences—spiritual wholeness, strength through adversity, the ability to make a positive impact with one’s life, and the promise of life eternal—are enormous; and they repeatedly appear throughout the Bible as the real consequences of faith. In response, therefore, to the question, “Why Believe?” a major answer is: “Because it makes a tremendous positive difference in one’s personal life!” This is sometimes called the pragmatic answer to the question. One believes because of the actual effect that belief has on life.

In our Confirmation class each year, there is a segment in which young people are asked to think along this line about the difference that belief makes in how you live your life. What difference does it make, for example, if you believe that all people are of infinite worth in God’s eyes? There have been societies in history that have not believed that, and that have treated people accordingly. But if you do believe that all people are of infinite value to God, then you will treat all people with respect and care. What you believe matters for how you carry out your life.

This means, quite naturally, that what people believe will have a major effect not

only on their own personal lives but on their society as a whole. Historically, belief in God has had a huge positive impact on a broad social scale. Look at colleges, for example, around the world; and you will find that a great many of them were founded by people who were motivated by their faith. The same is true of numerous hospitals. Look at the homeless shelters, clothing centers, food banks, and free clinics in towns across America. In most cases—in fact, in nearly all cases—they were started by and continue to be staffed and funded by people of faith. A prime example in our own community is the County Clothing Center, which had its beginning here in this church, and continues to be staffed by many volunteers from our church and others. Look at the twelve-step groups in any community. They were founded in faith—grounded in the importance of relying on a “higher power” to overcome addiction—and their most typical meeting space is in churches. We host six twelve-step groups in our church each week. Look at charitable giving overall, supporting a vast range of critically important undertakings; it is people of faith who are giving by far the lion’s share.

Or look beyond such tangible measures at the effect of religious belief on the overall values of a society. In America up to this day, the most important values that permeate the culture have their rooting in the Bible—and in the people of faith who throughout American history were promoting those values as an expression of their faith. Here are a few Biblical values that have made their way into American culture:

- 1) The society should ensure that the poor do not go hungry
- 2) People should be provided with shelter who have none
- 3) Special help should be given to the elderly and to orphans
- 4) All people should be viewed equally as children of God
- 5) If people are judged guilty of wrongdoing, they should not simply be irretrievably condemned but should be given opportunity to redeem themselves
- 6) Foreigners should be treated with compassion
- 7) Societies should strive to live in peace
- 8) Rulers are not above the law but are subject to it
- 9) Workers should be given regular time off to rest
- 10) There should be respect for each person’s property
- 11) People should treat one another with mercy
- 12) Everyone should make some personal sacrifices in order to bring help and benefit to others

Many people in America today would affirm these values, often without realizing that they all come straight out of the Bible. Of course, people of other religions have discerned a number of the same values, drawing on their own God-given moral consciousness. The point is that these values prevail in American culture because people of faith in years past were motivated to strongly advance such values, and to inculcate these principles in the society at large. These values do not necessarily prevail in a culture. American society has

the particular moral character that it has because of the impact of religious belief.

What happens, then, if belief fades? Many people nowadays want to say that you don't need belief in God in order for a society to have strong and positive values. They can point to the fact that even as church participation has faded in recent decades, many people continue to live by good values such as the importance of helping the needy and treating other people with compassion, or the value of seeking peace for the world and harmony among all peoples. They don't seem to realize that those values have come out of religious belief and have been carried to the present because of the witness of believers; and when people today absorb the values without the belief, they are simply riding the moral momentum of the religious belief of ages past. Belief in God has been the engine that has driven the moral development of American society. If the engine is removed, the momentum of the past will carry things forward for awhile. But what happens when the momentum fades? There is no particular reason for those moral values over the long term to hold.

Belief matters. It matters what people believe, and it matters when they help others to come to faith, because that belief will make an enormous difference in their personal lives and in the society at large. At the same time, it must be noted that belief will have a positive impact only when it is *true belief*—belief that involves an affirmation of what is actually true, and a genuine trust in God. False belief, conversely, can bring very negative consequences. In the past century, the false ideologies of fascism and communism wreaked havoc on the earth; and today a very twisted view of Islam, embodied by al-Qaeda and Isis, likewise demonstrates that false belief can result in tremendous evil. This of course reaffirms the central principle—*what people believe matters*.

Jesus encapsulated this principle in the Sermon on the Mount, in his classic illustration about good or bad trees and how they bring corresponding fruits. As he said, "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit." (Matthew 7:16–17) It is significant, in verse 17, that in the original Greek, two different words are used for "good" and two different words for "bad." In the phrase, "good" tree, the Greek word used is ἀγαθός (*agathos*), which indicates something that is intrinsically good, or good in its essential character. In "good" fruit, the Greek word used is καλός (*kalos*), which indicates something that is outwardly beautiful or good in appearance. Likewise in the phrase, "bad" tree, the Greek word used is σαπρός (*sapros*), which basically means rotten, while in "bad" fruit the Greek word is πονηρός (*poneros*), which indicates something that is wicked or that brings pain and trouble. The basic idea in each case is that the fundamental inner character of something inevitably produces a corresponding outward result.

A person's belief—what one holds to be true and right and where one puts trust—constitutes a person's fundamental inner orientation, and this will inevitably bear fruit of

one kind or another. This does not mean that all bad fruit is the same, or that all good fruit is the same. Jesus' words about grapes and thorns and figs and thistles call to mind the fact that in any garden there are all sorts of plants producing all sorts of results. Some plants might be troublesome, like thorns and thistles; some might be dangerous, like poison ivy or plants with poisonous fruit, and some might just be useless, producing nothing of value. Similarly, there are all sorts of false belief systems—from political extremism to religious fanaticism to atheism—which produce “bad fruit” of all different kinds. Some beliefs bring very toxic and dangerous results, and others simply produce little of value. But from the gardening perspective, it is all “bad fruit” in that it does not contribute anything good to the garden.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' words about the good and bad fruit are part of a warning against false teaching. You can recognize false teaching, Jesus says, by looking at its fruit—something quite evident today when one looks at a movement such as Isis. Jesus' central point to his listeners is that they need to hold to true belief; for it is only when one has authentic faith in God that one finally becomes like that tree in Psalm one—which flourishes even through tough times and which truly and lastingly bears good fruit.

But if true belief is so critical, both for one's own destiny and that of the larger community, how does one know exactly what true belief is? This will be the subject of the final sermon in this series, next Sunday. In the meantime, we are encouraged to be like the tree planted by the water, which draws deeply upon God's grace and truth.