

# CULTIVATING THE VIRTUES

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## Faith

Faith is a personal experience that is rooted in the heart and that contemplates the existence of a superior being. So we can affirm that faith is a gift, it is a gift from God to each one of us. There is no scientific method to measure faith in people, because faith is concretized and manifested according to the personal experiences of each person and how these same experiences influence the personal relationship we have with God. For some, faith is viewed in a more pragmatic way and for others in a more mystical way.

In Pauline Theology, faith is defined as "*the guarantee of the goods that are expected, the full certainty of the realities that are not seen.*" It would be good to ask what are those goods that await us and what are those realities that are not seen. In accordance with what Jesus expressed in the Gospels, we could establish that the Kingdom of God is the goods that await us and have the absolute conviction that we are going to receive them. That guarantee exists because the one who offers these goods is the perfection of everything. However, we may be at risk of not receiving these precious assets if we deny the existence of the Creator and if we do not bond in a personal relationship with Him.

Saint Paul focuses on expressing that faith is a strong spiritual connection to the Risen Christ, whom he met on his way to Damascus. In some way Paul's experience makes his writings connect more with a faith of mystical characteristics. Paul, by reason of his own transcendental experience, understands that God seeks to meet man and he tries to transmit this to the first Christian communities, putting human conditions in the background.

In short, for Saint Paul, faith represents recognizing Christ as Lord and Savior who will give us the expected goods, but in a spiritual way. In addition, therefore, it is something that cannot be seen or perceived by human eyes, which is why it emphasizes realities that cannot be seen.

On the other hand, on the second chapter of the letter from St. James, the apostle tells us that faith requires concrete works and actions: "*The same thing happens with faith: if it is not accompanied by works, it is completely dead.*" In this context, St. James allows us and should invite us to connect these two realities, the human and the spiritual. The challenges of daily life connected with the risen Christ must bear witness in a concrete and real way to our personal encounter with God. In the same way, generations before ours that saw these actions could understand in a pedagogical way that God manifested himself in the history of humanity, in the Incarnation, in the death and resurrection of His Son, that this reality manifested in the history of the humanity and connected to the transcendental resurrection experience needed to be shared with the communities. Hence, this experience caused a radical change in those who experienced it back then and this encounter motivated a conversion. A statement that is still valid for those of us who now experience it.

Said more simply and far from complicated theological interpretations, we could argue:

1. For Saint Paul, faith was demonstrated by believing in something that cannot be seen but is an experience of the spirit, not connected with the daily life of people.
2. For St. James, the spiritual experience of faith that St. Paul speaks about is important, but it must also have a manifestation in the daily life of the people.
3. On a personal level, my faith must include these two dimensions: I must learn to cultivate both, the faith that Saint Paul proposes and the one suggested by St. James. In other words, my testimony as a missionary disciple impels me to seek spiritual reward and to be a manager and builder of the Kingdom of God here and now.

Perhaps a concrete way of defining faith is the following: our personal response that is born from the heart when we have felt or experienced an encounter with God in our lives that causes us to change and that encourages us to share that experience with others, an action that it is offered as a sign of transcendence in the risen Jesus.

Jesus said if you have faith the size of a mustard seed the mountains would move. A strong truth. How well Jesus knows us! Because at the slightest blow of the wind our faith is questioned. It is when our lives are plunged into difficulties that we feel our faith being tested. It will be enough to remember any event where we have felt vulnerable: whether it is an illness, an accident, or a natural catastrophe, when feelings that question our faith have emerged or we assume positions in which we think that our situation is due to not having a solid faith and therefore we are being tested. In reality it is neither one nor the other, nor is it because of the little faith we may have, nor is it a test that God gives us.

Moments like these in which many things have changed in our lives and in the way we live, may have been a good opportunity to think about our priorities and how our relationship with God is and how faith operates in this dynamic.

Faith is like a muscle: it needs to be exercised. And it is here where I invite you to resort to prayer. But, to cultivate faith, we must pray our prayer a little differently. Listen to God through a short Bible reading, whichever you want and then talk to Him. With this simple exercise, we will learn to have confidence in God. Moreover, beyond the definitions of faith, it is finding that in this relationship that we have with God, reaffirms the certainty of the guarantee of Heaven's goods.

Questions to ponder:

- Where is my faith more inclined: towards the definition of Saint Paul or the Apostle James?
- In what moment or circumstance have I felt that my faith has been tested with greater force?
- What am I going to do to further cultivate my faith?