

September 27

Lesson 4

Faith, Salvation, and Righteousness

Focal Passage: Romans 10:5-13

Background Text: Romans 10:5-17

Purpose Statement: To explore how our speech strengthens our faith and how our faith enables our speech

Romans 10:5-13

⁵Moses writes about the righteousness that comes from the Law: *The person who does these things will live by them.* ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith talks like this: *Don't say in your heart, "Who will go up into heaven?"* (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or *"Who will go down into the region below?"* (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? *The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart* (that is, the message of faith that we preach). ⁹Because if you confess with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and in your heart you have faith that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰Trusting with the heart leads to righteousness, and confessing with the mouth leads to salvation. ¹¹The scripture says, *All who have faith in him won't be put to shame.* ¹²There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives richly to all who call on him. ¹³*All who call on the Lord's name will be saved.*

Key Verse: "Because if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and in your heart you have faith that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

A well-known story (at least among United Methodist pastors and seminary students) recounts the time John Wesley sought advice about his spiritual life. Wesley had to face his doubts and fears when he encountered a storm at sea. He noticed the reaction of a group of Moravians who sailed on the same boat. They did not seem to display the fear that he felt inside. He later sought the counsel of a Moravian leader.

Wesley asked Peter Boehler how he could preach about faith when his own faith disappointed him. Boehler's famous reply has lived on in seminary classrooms: "Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith."¹

We often encounter the advice that our actions can influence our feelings. If we practice gratitude, we can begin to feel grateful. If we act despite our fears, we can overcome our fears. If we show kindness, we cultivate feelings of love.

The key verse for this lesson and the advice given to Wesley raise the question of the relationship between our speech and what we experience on the inside. The verse includes what we confess with our mouths and faith in our hearts.

The advice to Wesley suggests that speech may come first. This lesson explores the interaction between what we know in our minds, what we feel in our hearts, and what we speak with our mouths. We can also draw inspiration from a man whose influence has covered the globe and who once had doubts about faith; and we can learn from his experience about speaking faith even when we don't always feel it inside.

Understanding Head and Heart

We all know the tricky business of aligning our feelings with what we believe. We sometimes call this the head/heart dilemma. We think one thing, but our feelings betray us.

We believe the doctor when she tells us we need to diet and exercise, but we give in to temptation when we come near food. We roll over when the alarm sounds to get us up for a walk. We believe in a God who acts in the world and wills the healing of creation, but we live as if we don't. We consider ourselves people of faith in God (as Wesley would have), but we find our fears overwhelming us (as Wesley did).

Because of our understanding of the difference between what we believe in our heads and what we feel in our hearts, I find myself curious when I read Romans 10:9: "If . . . in your heart you have faith that God raised [Jesus] from the dead, you will be saved." I tend to think of Jesus' resurrection as something I believe in my intellect. I don't believe it because of some feeling that arises from within me.

If we examine Paul's understanding of human nature, we can see that his understanding was complex and might differ somewhat from how we understand it. At various points in his writings, Paul used two terms, one that we might translate as "heart" and one that we might translate as "mind." Paul used *heart* in the way we might think of as the center of our emotions. He said in Romans 9:2 that he felt "great sadness and constant pain in [his] heart."

Paul also used *heart* in ways that sound like the process of thinking. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, he described God as "the same one who shined in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ." So, for Paul, the heart was sometimes the location of such emotions as anguish; and at other times, the place where God gives knowledge.

The Old Testament uses *heart* in this way as well. Two sayings stand together in Proverbs. Proverbs 15:13 says, "A joyful heart brightens one's face, but a troubled heart breaks the spirit." The saying in the next verse gives another way of looking at what *heart* means: "An understanding heart seeks knowledge, but fools feed on folly."

Paul used the term that we can translate as "mind" in Romans 7, when he talks about an inward struggle. Readers of Paul have wondered through the ages whether Paul here was referring to his own personal struggle or the struggle of the average person. In any case, Paul described a battle within a person over obedience to the law/teaching of God.

"I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body" (Romans 7:22-23). Paul seems to have used the term *mind* here to describe our rational self, the part of us that chooses what to believe and how to act. Paul described a battle between that part of human nature and the weaker part that gives in to temptation, even when the person believes the action is wrong.

Paul also used this term *mind* in 1 Corinthians 14:14-19 to talk about praying in tongues. Paul wanted his mind involved in prayer as well as his spirit.

When have your head and your heart been at odds?

Integrating Head and Heart

This word study raises the question of what Paul meant when he said, "In your heart you have faith that God raised [Jesus] from the dead." *Heart* can mean a source of knowledge, but also the part of us that feels emotion.

I have known people who believed certain things about the faith because it made them feel better to believe it. I have known people who believed certain

things because it was "what they had always heard." In both cases, the people didn't want to do the hard work of thinking through what they believed in their minds. What they believed kept them in their comfort zones.

Part of the reason I believe in the Resurrection is that I consider it more likely that the tomb was empty on that first Easter morning than that the disciples suddenly decided to start saying that the tomb had been empty. Much of my belief in the Resurrection comes from careful reasoning about the possibilities.

Either the disciples found the tomb empty, or they decided for some unknown reason to go out and preach that they had found the tomb empty. In my judgment (not my feelings), not a single verse of the New Testament makes any sense apart from the Resurrection. The entire New Testament affirms the Resurrection.

Despite my conviction that I believe in the Resurrection because I have reasoned my way to this belief, Paul used the term *heart* in the passage. He could have used *mind*. We cannot interview Paul to ask him why he used *heart* instead of *mind*. Perhaps, though, we can say that we should think through why we believe in the Resurrection, but also that belief in the Resurrection should affect our emotions. Because of the Resurrection, we take hope, we feel joy, and we claim power.

What are ways that you see emotion affect what you believe in your mind about your faith? In what ways have you struggled to push yourself to determine what you believe? How does your belief in the Resurrection affect the faith in your spirit?

Speech and Faith

Part of the reason that John Wesley doubted his faith was that he felt such fear in the storm while crossing the Atlantic on a boat. He admired the apparent faith of the Moravians.

Many of us might say that we affirm in our intellect the doctrines of the Christian faith: God as Creator, Jesus as the one who died on the cross and rose again, the Holy Spirit as the sustaining presence of God, the new creation that awaits us, and has begun already. Despite our affirmation of these beliefs, we struggle with fear, doubt, a lack of joy, an inability to forgive, a sense of trust in our hearts (the seat of emotion).

The advice of Peter Boehler to John Wesley was to preach faith until he had it. That advice suggests that the act of speaking about faith will enable faith to grow within a person, reaching even to the deep places that still doubt what we believe in our minds. I have talked to Sunday school teachers who told me that teaching helped them develop their own faith. Not all of us feel a call to preach or teach. How can those who do not feel called to preach or teach follow Boehler's advice?

The key verse connects confessing with one's mouth that Jesus is Lord and having faith in one's heart about the Resurrection. One of my seminary professors, Joseph Allen, told us that the phrase *Jesus is Lord* was the oldest and shortest creed. He said also that it was the only creed that united all Christians. The willingness to affirm the creed "Jesus is Lord" was what separated Christians from non-Christians.

United Methodists make use of a number of creeds and affirmations of faith that arose after the use of the creed "Jesus is Lord." Even if we do not feel a call to preach or teach, we can all recite a creed. Even though I have led contemporary worship services and have felt blessed by them, I regret that most contemporary worship does not teach the congregation the creeds. Youth who attend contemporary worship may never learn the creeds, except in confirmation class.

These summaries of the faith remind us of the core of what we believe. We might paraphrase Boehler's advice: Recite the creed as a summary of the faith until you have faith. And then because you have faith, you will recite the creed with

trust.

Which creed has been most meaningful to you, and why? How has reciting a creed helped your faith to grow?

Creed and Courage

The late senator John McCain reported in his book *Faith of My Fathers: A Family Memoir* that his faith sustained him in his experience as a POW during the Vietnam War. McCain survived the deprivation, torture, and agony of life in prison by prayer and little signs of God's presence.

One of those signs was the occasion where he discovered the words "I believe in God the Father Almighty" scratched into the wall of his cell. These opening words of the Apostles' Creed became a reminder to McCain of God's presence, even in a POW camp.²

We all desire to experience faith as intellectually satisfying and emotionally fulfilling. We want a faith that touches all of who we are. We want to be able to say with the psalmist, "Let everything inside me bless [the Lord's] holy name" (Psalm 103:1).

Paul connected two parts of us: the mouth (the organ of speech) and the heart (perhaps the center of thought and feeling). If we typically think that reciting a creed should presuppose a deep faith, Wesley's experience suggests that we can feed our faith by reciting the creed.

Speaking the words might remind us of the essentials of our faith and awaken in us a deep faith that becomes emotional trust in God and the promises of resurrection and new life. We want a faith that manifests in our speech, but our speech may feed our faith.

Paul specifically said that, if we recite the simple creed and have faith in our hearts, we will "be saved" (Romans 10:9). Salvation is more complex than we often

think. God offers us salvation as a gift. Salvation refers to the promise of the Resurrection. It refers also to wholeness now. After Jesus healed a person, he often told them that their faith had saved them. That understanding of salvation refers to wholeness. If we confess with our mouths and trust in our minds and hearts, we can begin to experience wholeness.

What has been your experience of reciting a creed? In what ways can you make recitation of a creed, in worship or individual devotion, a way to feed your faith? How might memorizing several of the creeds enable you to use them devotionally?

Sometimes, O God, we struggle with knowing exactly what we believe. We believe in Jesus, but we don't know what to believe about Jesus. Help us to know what to affirm about our faith. Other times, we find doubts that crowd trust out of our hearts. Enable us to find ways to continue to trust, even when trouble, grief, or our inner conflicts cause us to doubt. Give us the words to say when we want to express our faith. We thank you that you love us in spite of our doubts and intellectual questions; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹From *John Wesley*, by Albert C. Outler (Oxford University Press, 1964); page 17.

²From "Prayers, Sermons, the Apostles' Creed: The Inspiring Story of John McCain's Faith as a POW," by Tyler O'Neil (pjmedia.com/faith/prayers-sermons-the-apostles-creed-the-inspiring-story-of-john-mccains-faith-as-a-p-o-w/).