

Discipleship Groups — Level 6

WEEK 1

Heart Check: FAITH

This next season of small groups is extremely important to our spiritual lives. The following six weeks are based on an exhortation that the Apostle Paul gave to the church in Corinth. He said in 2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV), “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” Or, as it says in the New Living Translation, “Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith.”

This is a powerful—and challenging—verse. Paul is not talking to unbelievers, he is speaking to the Church, many of whom had been believers for a long time! His challenge to the Church was to make sure that their faith was genuine and firm. Therefore, he was issuing a “heart check” to make sure everything was in line in their faith, which is what we are doing during these six weeks.

Faith is not a mere “thing” to be possessed; it is living, active, and growing. Yes! Faith can grow! The more we get to know Jesus Christ, the more we learn to trust in Him. Faith is less a thing to be had as it is a relationship to cultivate.

As any relationship grows, develops, and matures with time and investment in the other person, so our faith grows with time and intentional investment in our relationship with God. The more we know and experience God, the more we trust Him and the more we grow ourselves to be like Him. The initial gift is from God, but we have a hand in cultivating this gift into maturity.

There is a point in time where we receive the gift of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, but Jesus’ own teachings were very explicit that if we are to follow Him, then we are to deny ourselves; we are to no longer live for our desires, wants, comfortability, or sin. Second Corinthians 5:17 says that if we are in Christ Jesus, we are a new creation. First Corinthians 6:19 says that we do not even belong to ourselves since Jesus bought us with a price.

Our life of faith goes beyond simply believing God exists and simply believing in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection. We are told to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). 2 Thessalonians 1:3 says that our

love for each other increases as faith grows more and more. Romans 1:17 says, “for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith,” meaning that faith is progressing, deepening, and maturing.

Colossians 2:6-7 says, “so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.” And Ephesians 4:15 says that “we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, Christ.”

Could it be that many believers in Jesus Christ—even many long-term believers—have grown complacent in their relationship with God? You might say, “Well, I have faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and that is all I need. I know God and I am good.” That is a dangerous way of thinking. This way of thinking assumes that after accepting Jesus into your life there is nothing left to do! Receiving Jesus is only the beginning point; it is like the marriage ceremony. The ceremony only marks the beginning point of the new relationship! You cannot get married and then not do anything with the relationship afterward! It is only AFTER the marriage ceremony that the relationship begins to grow, deepen, and mature.

Complacency and comfortability are mortal enemies to our living faith—these will kill our faith very quickly and many times that death goes unperceived by such a person, and this is very easy to do.

No one consciously tries to kill their faith, it happens just as a relationship dies: Lack of intentional investment of time, and a lack of self-denial. Where we only serve ourselves, no relationship can flourish. It is the same with faith. If we start serving our own interests and desires above serving the Lord and serving others, then our relationship with God will become less and less instead of growing into full maturity. That is the place where we can be lulled into a false sense of security in our faith—when we forget that to serve and follow Jesus is self-denial.

So, these six weeks are designed to help us examine and test ourselves and to re-evaluate the strength and genuineness of our faith so that we don’t miss the mark; so that, at the end of our lives, when we stand in front of Jesus Christ to give account for our lives, we are not ashamed, we don’t fail the test, and the fruit of our faith is pleasing to the Lord!

So, how do we test our faith? I believe that the first test is in evaluating our relationship with God, and there are some very simple things we can do to examine this. First, do I

spend any time with Jesus during the week, or is it mostly only on Sundays? Or even more—do I only draw near to God when I have problems?

Over two decades of pastoral ministry, I have seen many people sincerely come to God in times of great difficulty, and God, in His mercy, meets them where they are and He works a miracle for them. Then, curiously, I don't see those people again for a long time. They simply disappear once their need is met by God. The next time I see them is when they are in crisis again. Such a person has enough faith to come to God in need but is uninterested in any sort of growing relationship. These kinds of people have a deformed sense of "love" for God in only a sort of weak and selfish way that never permits for true growth, faith, or relationship.

Sunday-only Christians at least make the attempt to make a habit of coming to the House of the Lord to worship, which is a step in the right direction, but in an examination of faith, they may fall short.

Faith is more than a weekly commitment; it is what I put my trust in and what I choose to believe the most. We can evaluate our genuine faith not by what we say, but by what we do in our reactions and responses to various things in our lives.

Jesus said in Matthew 6 to not be anxious about the various needs we have in our lives, rather we are to seek Him, His Kingdom's rulership in our lives, and His right way of living, and God will attend to our every need. So, is this a basis for our trust in God, or do we live with constant fear and anxiety about whatever lack we have? In our culture today, everyone seems to have mental health issues—chief among them are anxiety and depression—even among believers. But this only goes to show where faith has been placed: it is believed that "my" problems are bigger than my God. A growing relationship with God will allow for a deeper trust, which allows for anxiety and depression to be dispelled.

What about your money? Do you have a hard time tithing? If so, is your faith placed more in your own ability to handle your finances instead of trusting God with your income?

What about decisions in your life? Do you consult the Lord when issues arise, or are you confident in your own choices? Do you believe that God has the world in His hands and that He has a plan for your life? What does your prayer life and seeking God for things in your life say about your faith in Him?

What about when you hear God's Word? Do you obey it, or is your faith placed more in your ability to run your own life according to your own terms? Does your faith waver with your emotional ups and downs, or is it firmly planted in confidence in and obedience to God's Word?

For the next several minutes, discuss these things with your small group and begin to examine and test the status of your faith in the Lord. I understand that some of these things may be tough to talk about or to confront within your own self, but it is necessary, and you will be much stronger for it!