

## Is Believing in Christ Enough? Q & A about Salvation & Works

### WHAT IS THE PROPER RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL?

Question from June 24, 2012 message:

We base most everything on John 3:16 and call people to believe. But today's message seems to take that all away. How are any of us to know if we "hate" our families enough, or "love" Jesus just enough? Are we forgiven and accepted by Christ dying or not? We lead new believers to think that is enough when there is clearly so much more. How is anyone to know for sure they are going to heaven? Your sermon was great, and people need to know this, but it creates a hole in one's heart. It creates doubt. How can anyone ever measure up? How do we ever have peace? When I read what Jesus says I find it hard to believe that anyone can ever reach this heavenly goal. Thanks for putting it out there.

### ANSWER FROM PASTOR TONY

These are very good questions, and I appreciate your heart and struggle. You need to remember that all sermons that I preach have a context. This Sunday's sermon had the context of confronting easy believism and casual, cultural Christianity. So my emphasis was more on a person's commitment rather than Christ's work on the cross. There are other messages that I have preached that emphasize the grace of God and not falling into legalism. I did a message the Sunday following Easter, April 15, 2012, where I emphasized the grace of Christ in a person's relationship. A person could listen to that message and think that I was preaching easy believism.

So let me answer your question by explaining the full aspect of the gospel and our response to it. The essence of the gospel is that God came to earth in the person of his son Jesus Christ. Jesus completely fulfilled the law and was sinless. He then died on the cross, in our place, taking in his body all of our sins. He suffered the full wrath of God for all of our sinfulness, and to prove that God accepted Jesus' death on our behalf, he raised Jesus from the dead. "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15:1-4, ESV). Today, Jesus rules and reigns at the right hand of the Father in heaven. That is the gospel, and anything other than that gospel will not save us of our sins.

### How do we respond to the gospel?

The key word in the Scriptures is by faith. The apostle Paul wrote the entire book of Romans explaining how we are justified and declared righteous before a holy God, not by keeping the law but by faith in the finished work of Christ. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3:23-25, ESV). We sinned, Christ died for our sins, and we are justified by God when we receive what Jesus did on the cross by faith. So Christ's work is complete, but we must respond to Christ's work by faith. So faith is our critical response to the Gospel.

**What does it mean to have faith?** The problem with most of us is that we see the word faith, and we interpret it to mean intellectual belief. We take verses like John 3:16 that says, "Whosoever

believes” and conclude that faith in Jesus is simply an intellectually believing of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. So there is no commitment and there is no trust of our life to Christ. Our faith is simply a mental assent to Christian facts. Yet in the Greek language, the word “faith” and “belief” are identical words. When it says whosoever believes in John 3:16, it means whosoever has faith. So the critical question is, what is faith?

Now obviously, faith involves the intellect. I must have my facts straight. I must know the truth of the Gospel. But intellectual faith alone is not true biblical faith. The apostle James confronts this idea that our faith is just purely intellectual by saying even demons have intellectual faith. "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?" (James 2:19-20, ESV)

The word faith involves the intellect but it also involves your will. Faith means that you have trust or reliance or dependency on. Faith means you cling to that thing you are trusting. **When it comes to our relationship with God, it means that you come to an end of trusting yourself and move to a place of surrender and trusting in Christ.** That is why so many times when I offer an invitation I use the word surrender, and I say that you are making Christ your Lord because those words in our English language imply the volitional elements of faith.

You may ask, “How do you know that faith is more than just the intellect and that it involves a commitment of your life?” Because everywhere the gospel was preached in the Bible, the first decision that its hearers had to make was one of repentance. Notice how many verses teach this:

"Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17, ESV).

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, ESV).

When Jesus’ disciples were first sent out, their message was repentance. "So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent" (Mark 6:12, ESV).

After Jesus’ resurrection, he gave to his disciples the message of the gospel. "Jesus said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations'" (Luke 24:46-47, ESV).

So on Pentecost when the church issued its first invitation to the world to believe in Jesus, notice how it was offered in Acts 2:38. "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38, ESV).

The message of repentance was not just preached to the Jews and by Jesus’ first apostles. No it was also preached the same way by Paul to the Gentile world. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:33, ESV).

Notice Paul's call of response to every person in Acts 20:21. "Testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21, ESV)

It seems as though repentance and faith are two sides to the same coin. Repentance must come first. There must be a turning from ourselves and our sin and then a trusting in Christ as our Savior and Lord. There must be a turning from reliance on self to then have a reliance on Christ. There must first be a turning from our lordship to the Lordship of Christ. So repentance and faith go hand in hand. You can't have true repentance without faith and you can't have true faith without repentance.

### **False Gospels vs. True Faith**

Now, as far as the presentation of the gospel, it is sad but most gospel presentations simply appeal to a person's intellect. "Believe these facts about Jesus and ask Jesus to forgive you." There is no repentance and no turning from sin, and there is no real trusting of your life to Christ. Therefore, there is no surrender of your life to the Lordship of Christ. I would say that those gospel presentations are false gospels. It gives the message, but it does not adequately explain the appropriate response of genuine faith.

When a gospel presentation is made that asks for more than just believing facts, and it calls for a person to make a commitment of their life to Christ, that is when people respond with true faith. They know in their heart there needs to be a turning from sin and a surrender of their life to Christ. On the night I became a Christian, the Holy Spirit was convicting me of my lifestyle. No one told me the things I needed to repent of, but I knew because the Holy Spirit was making it clear. No one said, make Jesus your Lord, and yet in my heart I wanted to surrender to Him. So when I prayed, I know my words were not perfect but my heart was broken, and I called out to Jesus. The Bible says, "Whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13, KJV).

Some may object saying, "If faith involves repentance and some type of surrender to the Lordship of Christ, then you are making faith into a work for salvation, and we know that we are not saved by works." "For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourself, it is a gift of God: Not of works lest anyone boast" (Eph. 2:8-9, KJV). I would heartily agree that we are not saved by works. We can never be good enough. We could never love enough to be righteous enough to be accepted by God. It is always faith in the finished work of Christ. But true biblical faith is more than the intellect; faith involves your will as well as your mind.

I used the illustration of exchanging your vows in my sermon. When a bride and groom exchange their vows, they are making promises and entering into a covenant that they do not fully understand yet they say, "I do" and "I will." At that moment they are married. In their marriage they will face challenges that they never expected, but because of that vow and the commitment they made on their wedding day, they will be faithful and fulfill their promises. In the same way, when we become followers of Jesus Christ, we do not know all that our lives will experience. Yet by the grace of God, we will remain true to our Lord and seek to serve Him all the days of our life.

That is the difference between faith and works. I made a covenant vow to my wife. I am now married. That will never change. Because of the relationship that I now have with my wife, I will seek to love her and serve her needs all the days of my life. In the same way I made a commitment to follow Jesus, and because of that decision, I will seek to love him and serve him all the days of my

life. Works follow the commitment. Works follow faith. If we have no works after our faith, then our faith was flawed. We are not saved because of our works, but if we are saved, there will be works that follow. Our love follows our faith.

Some may object and say, "Committing your life to Christ and His Lordship is too hard." That is like saying loving my wife is too hard. You see, when you say "I do" to Christ, you are doing it out of a heart of love. It is a response of JOY! When our minds are enlightened to the truth of the gospel and the beauty of Christ and His work, surrender and repentance is a joyful expression. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44, ESV). I'm willing to joyfully surrender everything when I see the value and worth of the treasure that is Christ. The rich young ruler's response was the opposite when he was called to respond with total surrender: "he went away sorrowful" (Matthew 19:22 ESV).

### **True Faith Brings Change**

Now at the moment that we have true faith, we experience what theologians call regeneration. God's Spirit comes into our bodies and we are born again. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" (1 John 5:1, ESV).

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own" (1 Cor. 6:19, ESV).

When God's Holy Spirit comes to take residence in our lives there will be a life change that takes place. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17, ESV). Because God's Spirit lives inside of us, we want to follow Christ and do his will. We start to live righteous lives. The Bible says that true Christians can't keep sinning and when they do sin, they are convicted and must eventually repent. "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9, ESV). True Christians will also love and obey God and love others. "Everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" (1 John 5:1-2, ESV).

When a person has experienced true faith, they then experience true regeneration that changes their life. So the only conclusion is that if a person does not have a changed life, then they must not have had true faith. The external works that we see in our life are a confirmation of our faith.

### **Assurance of Salvation**

You asked a question, "**How is anyone to know for sure they are going to heaven?**"

I believe that God wants to give us assurance and hope of heaven, and going through a time of examination of our faith is both good and biblical. "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!" (2 Corinthians 13:5, ESV)

I think it can be profitable to examine our conversion experience to see if we really expressed true faith or just intellectual assent and easy believism. So based on what I have shared above about

true faith, I want you to ask yourself these questions about your conversion experience.

1. Was there repentance (a turning from self and sin) when you came to Christ?
2. Was there a surrender of your life to Christ?
3. Was there any life change after this experience?

If you answer “no” to these questions then most likely you have never experienced true faith.

The Apostle John said that we can know for sure if we are going to heaven. He wrote the book of 1 John to help us know. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13, ESV). When you study the book of 1 John, he doesn’t just look at your conversion experience. He tells you to look at the fruit of your whole life. He makes statements like “by this you know ...” In the book of 1 John, he asks questions like ... Do you believe Christ came in the flesh and is from God? Do you love God? Do you love others? Has sin become a habit in your life or do you feel conviction and repent of your sin? Are you obedient to God? Those are just a few of the questions that John uses to help you know if you are a Christian or not. Jesus put it like this: “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:16-17, NASB).

No one can rest on the laurels of their supposed conversion experience. If they do not have a life that matches faith, then they are not truly Christians. “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (1 John 2:29, ESV).

“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7, ESV).

“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10, ESV).

I know this response has been long, but I wanted to be thorough. I encourage you to read the Scriptures and other books that give greater detail and articulate this issue even more clearly. John MacArthur's book, *The Gospel According To Jesus*, is a classic and the most thorough book on this subject. Another more contemporary book is *Not A Fan* by Kyle Idleman.