

The Faith that Saves

In this series of articles we're looking at Jesus' teaching about some who believe themselves to be Christians, but tragically they will stand before Jesus at the final judgment only to hear him say, "...depart from me, I never knew you." Surely there is no more important question in all of life than, "How can sinners be in a right relationship with a holy God?" The teaching of this passage is that some believe themselves to be right with God and are spiritually deceived, i.e., gospel confusion.

In my last article I noted that we're not saved by our works of obedience. In fact, mankind, who is inherently sinful, could never contribute anything to the perfect work of Jesus Christ. That being true, what part, if any, do good works play in our salvation? The answer to this question lies in the biblical teaching of the ways in which genuine salvation must, necessarily, result in positively changed lives from the inside-out (Titus 2:11-14). Our good works cannot save us but rather, they flow out of gospel changed lives. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" (James 2:14). James, in verses 15-26, unpacks the biblical reality that a true saving faith produces God-honoring works of obedience. And yet, some have confused James' teaching by saying in effect, "It's important that we have faith in Jesus Christ, but we must add our works of obedience to his." In this scenario, my works are equally important and must be added to Christ's works in order to be right with God.

It's extremely important that we're not self-deceived about what it means to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation. To help us in our understanding of spiritual deception let me begin by giving a couple of biblical examples of false belief. "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder!" (James 2:19) Wow! In another passage in Matthew, Jesus encounters two demon-possessed men. The demons, speaking through these men, cry out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God?" Notice that these demons know and believe that Jesus is the "Son of God." In what sense can demons from Hell "believe" in Jesus? One thing is abundantly clear. Their belief, such as it is, is not a saving belief. The difference is between an eternity in Heaven and an eternity in Hell. The importance of a right belief in Jesus Christ cannot be overstated! Let's see if we can gain some clarity that will help us understand in order that we're not self-deceived.

During the time of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation there were those who, just like today, taught that belief in Jesus is simply knowing something of his life as taught in the Bible. Even though his life and ministry makes no difference in my life personally, I'm not opposed to Jesus nor am I opposed to those who believe in him. Some argued that if you believe this much you're eternally secure and you can then live your life any way you choose. After all, Jesus forgives my sins and salvation is by grace and not by works, right? The Reformers

responded, from the testimony of scripture, that there are three aspects of a genuine saving faith.

—The first aspect is knowledge. Generally speaking we must have a correct knowledge of our sinful condition, of who Jesus is as the second person of the eternal Trinity; he is divine and human, i.e., he is God incarnate and salvation is by grace through faith alone. This is not exhaustive, but you get my meaning.

—The second aspect is assent. This is a word that merely speaks of agreement. So, then, not only do I have a certain knowledge of what the Bible teaches about Jesus, I believe that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. And yet, knowledge and assent were exhibited by the demons. The truth is if we simply stop at this point we'll be damned eternally!

—The third aspect is personal trust. This aspect is critical to genuine salvation and produces a lifelong commitment to Christ. This is the faith which produces good works that James speaks of. It's this true belief from a changed heart, by grace, that saves.

To summarize, if we say we believe in Jesus Christ and yet have no desire to worship, serve and obey him all our lives, our faith is not genuine; our belief is a demons belief. As the hymn writer, Isaac Watts rightly declared, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul my all."

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