

Easily Missed Signs Your Faith Is Based on Religious Duty

I sat on the plush, cream-colored sofa, helping my mentor fold laundry while her 2-year-old played on the floor. I was a senior in college, involved in campus ministry and leading a Bible study, and I enthusiastically updated her on both endeavors. I'd begun telling yet another story when she calmly interrupted me with a simple, matter-of-fact statement: "You believe in a works-based gospel."

We'd known each other a while, and her statement stunned me. Was she serious?

I quickly brushed it off in the moment. But later that week, I found myself kneeling by the side of my bed, soaking my plaid purple bedspread with tears. She was right.

There I was, wallowing in my sin, wanting desperately to be back in the loving arms of my Savior. I had asked for forgiveness, but the relief wasn't coming. As I poured my guilty conscience onto the pages of my journal, I was struck by one word: time.

That's what I thought I needed: time. I didn't really want forgiveness. I wanted time—enough time to fill my life up with the right things, the good things, to settle the score. It was salvation by works at its worst.

All my striving, all my desire to put time between myself and my mistakes, it was another attempt to earn my salvation through my own effort.

Rather than trusting the work of Christ on the cross for my righteousness, I had become dependent on my own actions to

save me.

I was living exactly like the Israelites Paul describes in Romans 10:3: “For, being ignorant of God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness of God”

After Christ’s death and resurrection, Israel was still working hard to keep the Law of Moses in order to gain righteousness. They were working to save themselves, forgetting that “Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness for every one who believes” (Rom. 10:4).

The law, our works, the right things—they were never supposed to save us. God had planned our salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ all along. Christ is the only perfect fulfillment, the only victory we have over sin and death. His perfect life allows us to be justified through our faith alone. Faith and nothing else—just Jesus.

As I knelt beside my bed that day, I realized Jesus truly was all I needed. His sacrifice covered me then, despite all my striving, and it covers me today. I need His righteousness, not my own. He is enough.

Friends, no matter what our past, present, or future holds, the only work that can save us is the work Christ completed on the cross. May we call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

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Walk in This Biblical Martyr's Incredible Courage Through This Unlimited Source

I know all Scripture is ultimately about God. Still, I find myself putting undue emphasis on the other, oh-so-human characters in the story. I'd always walked away from Acts 7 in awe of Stephen. What faith! What courage! What knowledge of Scripture! But one day, I saw it.

Stephen isn't the hero of this story. The Holy Spirit is.

Now when I read this passage, the role of the Holy Spirit jumps out like it's written in neon lights. Here's what I see:

The Holy Spirit gave Stephen his edge. Stephen was in this situation in Acts 7 because of what happened the chapter before. The Holy Spirit filled Stephen with "faith and power," enabling him to perform amazing signs and wonders (Acts 6:8-10). The religious leaders didn't understand this, so they dragged him to the Sanhedrin under charges of blasphemy.

The Holy Spirit gave Stephen the words to say. During Jesus' ministry, He said this to His disciples: "But when they arrest you and hand you over, take no thought beforehand or premeditate what you should speak. But speak whatever is given you in that time, for it is not you who speaks, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11).

Stephen's situation was exactly that. Face shining like an angel (Acts 6:15), he stood before the Sanhedrin and gave a comprehensive history of God's people, while the faces of the religious leaders flamed with anger.

Stephen's message was all about the Spirit. The chapter might sound like a history lesson to us, but the Holy Spirit was

hurling a verbal spear right at the Sanhedrin's unbelieving hearts. Every time God had changed the system or sent the Israelites a message, they had resisted, turning to idols or killing the messengers—like they were doing now. Acts 7:51 was the clincher: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”

The Spirit enabled Stephen to forgive his enemies. As Stephen was stoned, Scripture tells us again that he was “full of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:55a). As he died at the hands of those who claimed to have the corner on religion, he did something unfathomable: he forgave them (Acts 7:60). Nothing but the Holy Spirit's power could produce that kind of radical grace.

It is appropriate to acknowledge the steadfastness and courage of our beloved martyr, Stephen. But let us never forget the God who indwelled and empowered him.

The Holy Spirit stood before the Sanhedrin that day. The Holy Spirit spoke words of truth. And, as the accusations and stones flew, the Holy Spirit ministered peace to our brother, Stephen. May we never try to explain that Spirit away. {eoa}

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A Common Way the Devil Distorts Biblical Repentance

Repentance is the life-giving rhythm of the Christian life. It restores hope, fuels joy, tells our fears to lie in “quietness and in confidence” (Isa. 30:15). This is the way it should be.

But there was a time when it wasn't that way for me.

After following Jesus for more than 30 years, the need for repentance hardened like a layer of frost over my soul. I wanted to repent, but I couldn't. I felt frozen. Fear and accusations assaulted my mind almost daily.

What if I don't repent the right way? What if I'm not repenting enough? How could I have failed again?

How can I come into His presence after this?

Clear as hindsight is, I can now see that repentance had become my way of proving I was worthy of God's forgiveness. I would repent for messing up again, and my heavenly Father would extend mercy. But, in my mind, my standing with God was dependent on my ability to get things right—and if I got things right, eventually repentance should become unnecessary. Oh, the confusion and distortion that comes when we forget the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Though gloriously redeemed by Jesus, my heart had become shackled by chains of unbelief, dramatically impacting the way I repented (or didn't repent). I simply could not believe that Jesus accepted me, mess and all, and that He didn't throw up His hands at my incessant need for forgiveness.

Who even wants to hang out with—let alone love and die for—hopelessly broken, messed up failures who can't ever get it right?

Only Jesus. Only the Messiah who tenderly said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

You see, "Jesus Loves Me" isn't only a song we learn as children; it's the anchor of truth upon which our faith rests. We're free to admit the depth of our need and the messiness of our realities when we believe that nothing—not even our

sin—can separate us from the love of Jesus.

Repentance and belief are two sides of the same beautiful coin. Repentance flows freely when we believe our sins have already been forgiven—past, present, and future.

Jesus, because of His great love for us, came to seek and save us while we were still dead in our trespasses (Eph 2:5). Knowing this kind of unmerited love and kindness changes us.

It

makes our repentance, our returning to God, as natural as breathing. It restores our relationship with Him.

Friend, don't repent to earn God's love. Repent because you are deeply loved by the God who already secured your forgiveness. Thanks be to Him.

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