

Faith Without Works: Are You Really a Christian?

Recently I taught through Matthew 10 at our Friday morning Man in the Mirror Bible study. I described the chapter as “Jesus Pilot Tests the Great Commission.”

After spending two years with his disciples, Jesus selected the 12 men he wanted, then sent them to pilot test his strategy for total global conquest. The Great Commission is for us too. In praying for his disciples, Jesus said, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (John 17:18, 20, NIV).

During one of several messages on Matthew 10, I told the men I had a couple of hard things to say. First, “If you are getting better treatment than described in Matthew 10, are you sure you are on the right path?” Second, “You either need to do the work (of making disciples), get trained to do the work, or admit that you’re not really in the deal.”

One of my dear friends told me that he thought I was too harsh. I thought a lot about that. The next week, I explained to the men at our Bible study that I would rather give men false doubt about their salvation than false assurance. Actually, I said I would rather not make an error in either direction! I would rather be able to walk the tightrope and neither cause men to wrongly doubt their salvation when they are saved, nor wrongly believe they are saved if they are not.

Oversimplifying the Gospel

If you were going to err—and I hope you don’t—would it not be better for some men who are saved to wrongly doubt their salvation? Here’s the problem. All the risks of false doubt are temporal, but all the risks of false assurance are

eternal. Again, I would rather not make a mistake at all. But if I do, God save me from oversimplifying what the gospel must cost a man—"easy believism."

Actually, I am struck by how blunt Jesus is. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Authentic discipleship is more than professing faith.

We Are Created for Good Works

In the famous passage Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul made it clear that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and not because of anything we do. Yet in verse 10, he goes on to say, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Good works, deeds, or bearing fruit are integral to Christian faith. James wrote, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?... Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14, 17). Martin Luther's chief lieutenant, Philip Melanchthon, said, "Justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone."

So What Does It Mean?

If a man has truly and earnestly repented of his sins and put his faith in Jesus Christ alone for his eternal salvation, then the matter is settled.

However, if a man professes faith and produces no fruit, he would be wise to question the authenticity of his faith. Better to risk false doubt than false assurance.

Someone who has been walking with Christ for a long time will usually produce more fruit than someone who has recently made a profession of faith. If a man doesn't produce fruit early on, that doesn't mean he will not do so as he matures spiritually. Yet if a man produces no fruit after many years

of professing faith, he would be wise to be concerned.

Nevertheless, it's biblical for the quality of our service to Christ to differ from person to person. We see that in Matthew 25 in the parable of the talents. In 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 we're told, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." In other words, no good work can improve on your salvation.

However, the text goes on to say, "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light ... If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

So the message is: If you have genuinely repented of your sins and received Jesus as your Savior, then you are saved for all eternity. However, if you are of "weak faith" and don't apply yourself, your salvation will be like "escaping through the flames."

The Incomparable Love of God

Every single human being on the face of the planet was created by God, is known intimately by God, and is taken care of by him. He knows our thoughts from afar. He knows every breath we take. He knows every word before it forms on the tip of our tongue. He knit us together in our mother's womb (see Ps. 139).

He watches everyone closely, examining every person on earth (see Ps. 11:4). Every hair on our heads has been counted (see Matt. 10:30). He has determined how long we will live and the exact places where we will live (see Acts 17:26).

You are very special to God. God loves you very much. Nothing you do will ever make you good enough for God to love you. Nothing you have done will ever make you bad enough for God not to forgive you. Your salvation does not depend on doing

good works, yet genuine salvation results in good works. Good works don't earn merit. Good works don't lead to the cross, but are the evidence that you have the cross.

Make Your Salvation Sure

Let's not take salvation for granted. Let's not tell men who sit on their thumbs, "That's okay. Don't worry about it. God loves you anyway." Instead, let's exhort men to faith and the good deeds that demonstrate faith. That was Paul's message, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ... I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:19-20).

You and I are of infinite value to the One who created us, sustains us and, if we turn to him in humble, repentant faith, will redeem us. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is the highest honor to which a human being can aspire. How does that happen?

God loves you very much, and he wants you to repent of your sins, put your faith in Jesus, and then give evidence of your repentance by doing the work for which you have been created. That's the simple, beautiful message of the gospel.

If anyone has been relying on "easy believism," they can make their salvation sure by faith and repentance, then do the work—or get trained to do the work. Our great God has something very special he wants each of us to do.

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