

Do You Really Believe?

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But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How then will they call on him in whom they had not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news..." So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ. Romans 10: 8-15; 17

For a long time now, I have had a great concern. I have been hesitant to speak about it, especially as a pastor. I wondered if I addressed this in a sermon whether those that hear it might think that I am judging people. But that's not my intention. I do not judge where a particular person's eternal destiny is going to be. That's the Lord's area. My great concern, though, is that many who claim to be Christians may not really be Christians. I cannot think of anything more terrible than being raised on that great Last Day and finding out that you are headed to hell instead of heaven.

So I have decided this morning to speak about this. But please keep in mind that I say these things so that each of us might examine ourselves, not somebody else. We can't see a person's heart and God is their final judge. The Bible even tells us in 2 Cor. 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith." That's what we are doing today.

My concern is mainly based on the words of Holy Scripture. Let's start with a quick look at the parable of the ten virgins found at the beginning of Matthew 25. Jesus told this parable about ten virgins who took their lamps, which were probably torches, and went to meet the bridegroom. Jewish weddings in those days often had the bridegroom, surrounded by friends, going to the bride's home, usually after sunset, to fetch her. The bride, dressed in her best, would then be carried in a litter to the bridegroom's house where a wedding supper would be eaten. It was usually quite dark, and those who were willing to carry torches would honor the bridal pair with lights so they could easily find their way to the dinner.

The torches would be trimmed at the end, dipped in oil, lit and last for around 15 minutes. But if you wanted to keep them lit for a while you need to bring along some spare oil. Five of the virgins were wise and did that; five of them were not and were utterly useless. They were not prepared. They left to get more oil and went to the marriage feast but the door was shut. They cried out, "Lord, lord, open to us." But the bridegroom answered and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Now why did the Lord tell this parable? What was the main point? The International Bible Commentary by F.F. Bruce says that the foolish have lost something here, but it is not a story of eternal destiny decided by the coming of Jesus. Yet, the words "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." indicated something different to me.

I could not accept that explanation. Matthew, Chapter 24, just before this chapter, spoke about the coming of Jesus and in Chapter 26 Jesus is talking about the Son of Man being seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven. This parable is located between two chapters about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It is important in translating the Bible to look at the overall context before making a final interpretation.

So that motivated me to check our church library for the self-study Bible of the English Standard Version that has been placed there. That's the translation we usually use in our churches. It has a much different explanation. It explains that this parable is a warning from Jesus. Although many are invited to share in the eternal joy of His kingdom, some will "miss out by failing to have a living faith at the end." (Ch. 25 notes at bottom of pg. 1638) I believe that this is the correct explanation because it fits with other passages of the Bible that touch on this topic. In John 15:4 Jesus says, "Remain in me and I will remain in you." In Rev. 2:10 our Lord is quoted, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Rev. 3:11 warns us: "I am coming soon. Hold fast to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." There are other references that support this viewpoint also.

My concern of many people claiming to be Christians who really are not Christians is also fed by surveys and polls of people's religious beliefs. A man by the name of George Barna has spent a good part of his life studying religious beliefs and viewpoints. He conducted his own survey on why people thought they would go to heaven, and 51% of those surveyed agreed with something like this: "If a person is good, or does good things for other people, he will get a place in heaven."

The great Italian actress Sophia Loren falls right into line with that kind of thinking. She reportedly said, "I should go to heaven; otherwise it is not nice. I have not done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as orchids, and I should go straight, straight to heaven." This may sound a bit humorous to some, but it really is tragic.

Why are people so intent on ignoring God's clear words? We need to have a response for them. God's Word is powerful and I think just one will suffice for today. Hear these words from Titus 3, verse 4: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

The Bible is very clear about what we should believe. We need to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who dies on the cross to atone for our sins and is our only way to heaven. He is the only Savior. He is the only path, not one of the paths. We are not declared righteous because of our good works and what we have done. We are saved only when we receive the righteousness of God through faith in what Jesus has done. Do you believe that? If not, the

Holy Scriptures state you are in great danger.

Today we read part of the letter Paul sent to the people of the church at Rome. In it, he sought to reinforce what saving faith really is and how we get it and how it is maintained. Romans 10:9-10 tells us, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

Now I am one of those pastors who believes that the use of the word "heart" here is important. You can have intellectual knowledge of something in your mind but not necessarily have it in your heart. The Hebrews considered the heart to be the core of one's being and the residence of the soul, the deepest, innermost part of a person, where thought, will, and motive are generated. Have you ever known someone to be doing something but his "heart" was not in it? There is a difference between the mind and what the Bible often refers to as a person's heart. In our heart, we must forsake claims of our own goodness and trust in the goodness or righteousness of Christ we receive through having faith in Him.

It would also be well for us to give some attention to the word "Lord" in our reading. It comes from the Greek "kurios" and means something like a sovereign authority or master. It describes Christ's relationship between himself and people in His church. It is interesting to note that one scholar pointed out that the Word "Savior" is used to refer to Jesus a total of ten times in the New Testament, but that Jesus is referred to as Lord over seven hundred times. (MacArthur, Romans, MacArthur N. Testament Commentary, 1994, pg. 75) A true believer in Jesus should recognize the importance of this and submit to Jesus as his Lord. If we have this relationship with him, we should confess it in our lives. That is strong evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life. (1 Corinthians 12:3)

That being said, there is no doubt that some Christians are weaker than others, and that even the best can be troubled at times with moments of doubt. Remember that Thomas had trouble believing in the resurrection at first. Peter once denied knowing the Lord - three times! In our Gospel lesson today, Peter was able to actually walk on water as long as he listened to and focused on Jesus, but when he started to focus on other things, he sank! Jesus said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

But Jesus did not abandon Peter. He reached out his hand to help him. And the Lord does not abandon us today, either, if we are willing to repent. It is important that we do not neglect the means by which our faith is strengthened. God first gives us faith as a gift, then He gives us the formula for maintaining and strengthening that faith. In Romans 10:17 it says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ." Please take this seriously and hear God's Word often. Amen.

