

The Test of True Salvation

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

BI: True saving faith is not measured by what we say but by whether or not we persevere in obedience to the word of God.

As a pastor I get to meet lots of people who wear the “Christian” label. Especially here in the south it seems most people have the idea that if you are going to be perceived as civilized then you’ve got to be a Christian. That means you’ve got to own a Bible, where a cross, and attend a church at least once or twice a year. And if you really want to feel spiritual, you will attend church every week. What further evidence of faith could possibly be necessary?

Unfortunately, this approach to Christianity has been around since the early days of the church. In fact, the church of Corinth had a number of people who clung to a misconception of what true saving faith is all about. They had their church. They had religious traditions. They had evidence of Spiritual gifts, and they had no less than the apostle Paul as their founding pastor! What further evidence of salvation was necessary?

Nevertheless, throughout his first letter to the church of Corinth, Paul expresses concern over whether their salvation is truly genuine. Consider, for example, chapter six where he writes (6:9-10), “*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.*”

Take note of the warning here: “Do not be deceived.” Why did he say that? Well, because some members of that church were deceived. Some of them thought that assurance of salvation was about making a profession of faith. Their confidence was in the fact that they *called* themselves Christians. But Paul is saying here that you can *call* yourself anything you like, but if you live an unrighteous life, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, people who live like this go to hell.

In chapter 10 Paul raises the same kind of warning. He reminds them that just because the *Israelites* walked through the desert under the shekinah glory of God, and passed through the Red Sea on dry ground, and ate manna and drank water from a rock it did not necessarily mean that they belonged to God. To the contrary (10:5) “*with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.*” (Read v. 6-12).

Now we come to chapter 15 and once again we get a hint of Paul’s concern that there were religious unbelievers in their church who did not know that they were lost. This whole chapter is about Resurrection. First Paul established the resurrection of Christ as a historic event that was witnessed by hundreds of people. Then (beginning with v. 20) he teaches us about the resurrection that every true believer will one day experience because Jesus is risen. The resurrection is the believer’s ultimate hope.

Without the resurrection, Christianity is worthless. That’s why Paul says things like, 15:14 “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, [and] your faith also is

vain.”

15:17 “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.”

15:19 “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”

The problem was, some were actually teaching that there is *no such thing* as resurrection. Paul’s question to them (v. 12) is this, “*How do some among you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?*” Such a teaching clearly contradicts both the O.T. and the teaching of Jesus who several times taught on the resurrection of God’s people.

You see, my friends, some in the church were more committed to philosophy and tradition than they were the word of God. And these were precisely the people Paul was concern about.

We get a glimpse of His concern in the first two verses of this chapter.

Read 15:1-2

You see, the true gospel is a powerful thing. It is grounded in the resurrection of Christ. It is that upon which a true believer stands before God justified and forgiven. It is the power of God that brings about salvation. Nevertheless, *not everyone who professes salvation actually possesses salvation.*

Notice how Paul very smoothly and subtly raises the possibility of religious unbelief with the simple word “if.” He writes, “.by which you are saved, *If you hold fast the word which I preached to You, unless you believe in vain.*”

This is a theme that Paul brings up again and again in his writings. He knew that there would always be unregenerate people in every church. That is, there would be people who at some point in their lives prayed the “sinner’s prayer” or walked the aisle to the front of the church professing Christ as Lord, and yet they remained lost. Their hope of salvation was in what *they did* according to the tradition of their church or their denomination, but the result was not true salvation. And the proof of that was in behavior that consistently demonstrated a heart left unchanged. They lacked the fruit of the Spirit. There was *NO* evidence of a changed life. They were the same person they were *before* they professed Christ only now they attended church and called themselves Christians. In Paul’s words, the gospel was the means “by which you were saved *if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.*”

The word for “vain” here means “without evidence,” “to no purpose,” or “without effect.” Some in the church of Corinth made a profession of faith in Christ that produced no evidence of regeneration and apparently had no effect on the way they thought, spoke, and lived. They did not hold fast the word which was preached to them.

Paul got this teaching from none other than the Lord Jesus, Himself. Jesus was always concerned about religious unbelievers who possessed useless, unbelieving faith. His classic teaching on this issue is found in Matthew 13:1-23. Turn there with me and let’s look at this briefly.

Read Matt. 13:18-23

What is Jesus saying? He's teaching us that *NOT* everyone who hears the gospel and *says* they believe are actually born again. Some will hear the gospel and receive it with joy, but as soon they face difficulty or persecution, they go right back to their old way of life.

On the other hand, some hear the gospel and seem to receive it, but the worries of the world and the deceitful temptation of riches draw them away. Of the four soils, only one remained. Only one "held fast." Only one bore fruit, thus proving that they were truly born of God.

Jesus taught this same truth with other parables as well. He spoke of many kinds of fish being caught in a single net (Matt. 13:47-50). Some were kept because they were good and some were thrown away into a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus teaches about two gates and two paths that go in opposite directions. In vs. 24-27 he teaches about two kinds of houses. One was built on the foundation of obedience to God's word and the other had no foundation. When the storm of God's wrath came the house without the rock of obedience as its foundation was swept away.

Jesus teaches the same truth in the story of the virgins without oil for their lamps, and servants who wasted their talents (Matt. 25:1-30).

Jesus makes all of this abundantly clear in Matt. 7:21-23 when he says, (Read Matt. 7:21-23

Every time we have a baptism service, as we will/did this morning, we hear testimonies of people who attended church for years thinking they were true believers, only to discover later that their faith was a sham. They had an intellectual knowledge of Jesus Christ, but their hearts had not been changed by Christ. As a result their lives were marked by disobedience to His word.

Someone may ask, "Are you teaching that salvation is by works?" Not at all! Salvation is all of grace because it is all of God. As Paul wrote in Eph. 2:8-9, "For by grace that you have been saved, through faith; and that *Not of Yourself*, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works lest any man should boast."

You see, God alone has the power to save. But let's not limit God's power *only* to His ability to save. The power that saves us is also the power that transforms us and sanctifies us. That's why in the very next verse Paul says, "For you are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

James (the brother of our Lord) said it this way,

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. (Jam. 2:14-17)

Back in the 15-1600's the reformers used to say, "The faith that saves is faith alone. But the faith that saves is never alone." It is always accompanied by Spirit-wrought works of righteousness. James goes on to say (v. 19) "*You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.*"

Believing that the facts of the gospel are true, that Jesus really did die on the cross and rise again... that's wonderful! But demons believe like that! They know the truth. The problem is, they have not been changed by the truth. The mark of one who has truly come to Christ savingly

is a changed life. They don't continue in the old way of life, they repent and begin living in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord.

Here's the way the apostle John says it. (1 John 3:10) "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." You see, the mark of one who is truly born again is that they live in obedience to the word of God. They *want* to obey. They *hate* their sin. They love Jesus and they love other people. They are truly changed by the power of God.

Someone will ask: What about people who grew up in church all their lives and served in ministry but then suddenly turn their backs on Christ? John has an answer for that. He writes, (1 John 2:19) "They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."

It's not that this person lost their salvation. Rather, it's that they never really had it. Despite all their religious professions, their attendance in services of worship, or their previous sacrifices, if they do not persevere they prove that they were never really children of God.

Jesus said it this way (John 8:31) "If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine."

This is a sobering truth, isn't it? I'm sobered by it every time I step behind this sacred desk to preach God's word because I know that there are always people in attendance - even here at Calvary Bible Church - who are religious unbelievers and they don't even know it.

Oh beloved, don't take your salvation for granted. Don't allow yourself to believe that just because you prayed the so-called "sinner's prayer" or got baptized, or served in some official capacity in the church, it means you can have confidence before God that you are saved.

In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul says "*Test yourself* to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?"

What is the test? I think 1 John is the most concise examination in the Scriptures of genuine saving faith. Let me suggest that you take some time today to read it and identify everything John says characterizes a true believer, and everything he says characterizes one who is lost.

In the mean time, ask yourself this:

Do I love God's word?

Am I living in obedience to God's word?

Do I love God's people?

Am I quick to confess my sin to God and to others whom I sin against?

Am I engaging in some secret sin, of which I have no desire or intention to repent?

Do I love to pray, and sing, and worship my heavenly Father?

Do I love to talk to others about the Lord?

Oh beloved. Don't take your salvation for granted. The gospel has been the means of your

salvation “if you hold fast the word” that has been preached to you, “unless you believed in vain.”

True saving faith is not measured by what we say but by whether or not we persevere in obedience to the word of God.