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Be Sure Your Faith is Genuine: Recognizing the Danger of Nominal Christianity

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Introduction

I was the only pastor in a room of men who suddenly began talking about what it meant to be a Christian. Each man had his own belief about what was required to get to heaven. And each one looked to me to support his opinion:

“You just have to believe, right?”

“No, it’s more than that. The way you live matters, doesn’t it?”

“I know the church is important, but I feel closer to God when I’m on the lake. Isn’t being close to God what really counts?”

“I believe in following Jesus’ teachings as best you can. Isn’t that what the Bible says to do?”

Each of these men seemed sincere. Each was kind and respectful of my role as a pastor. Several were church members. Each would have identified as “Christian” on a survey of religious beliefs. But in my opinion, none of them had truly experienced God’s saving power. They were Christians in name only. They were nominal Christians.

Most nominal Christians have attended church at some point in their lives. They believe that Jesus was a real historical person. They may even have some understanding of why he was crucified, and they may believe he was raised from the dead. They celebrate Christmas and Easter. Some have even been baptized. They believe in heaven and *hope* to go there when they die. But they are in grave danger. And sadly, this is the spiritual condition of many people throughout our world.

Jesus warned that many people would enter eternity with a false assurance of acceptance by God. His sobering words reveal the incredible danger of having a mere nominal faith in him:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Jesus' words are unsettling. Will there really be many people who have called him "Lord" and yet will be eternally rejected from his presence? Will there be people who have done good things in his name, yet have not really known him? Clearly, the answer is "yes," and there will be many who will hear these fearful words on the Day of Judgment.

It is both wise and reasonable to consider whether we have really received God's salvation provided by faith in Jesus Christ. That's why the Apostle Paul instructed Christians with these words: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

How can we be sure that our own faith is genuine, and that our relationship with Jesus Christ is secure? How can we be sure that the good news we share with family and friends includes all they need to know to be able to receive the gift of eternal life? It starts with having a right understanding of who God is and what he has done for us. It begins by having a clear comprehension of the gospel.



Really Understanding the Gospel

The word “gospel” simply means “good news.” The gospel is the good news of what our holy God has done to provide forgiveness of sins and eternal life for us. God works through the presentation of the gospel to bring people into an eternal relationship with himself. That’s why the Apostle Paul wrote, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). God’s power is at work to save us when we believe the gospel, but it is important that we understand it clearly.

There are a variety of ways to present the gospel, but there are certain foundational truths that should always be understood. When any one of these biblical ideas is neglected, one’s understanding of the gospel is incomplete. These ideas can be expressed in four points:

- God’s nature
- Our problem
- God’s solution
- Our response

Let’s consider what the Scripture says about each one of these foundational gospel truths.

God’s Nature

The gospel begins with God our Creator. Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Revelation 4:11 reads, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” Out of his great love, God created human beings for fellowship with himself. He created us to communicate with him and enjoy his presence. As the One who created us in his own image (Genesis 1:27), God alone has the authority to define good and evil, right and wrong, for us.

God our creator is perfectly holy and without sin or wrongdoing. In the words of Revelation 4:8, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” God’s holiness necessitates His separation from evil. As Psalm 5:4 says of God, “Evil may not dwell with you.” The fact that

God is perfectly holy and is also a “righteous judge” (Psalm 7:11) presents a problem for us.

Our Problem

Our problem is our sin that separates us from our holy God. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, we human beings have been alienated from God by our sin. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10) and “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Many people fail to grasp the seriousness of their sin because they evaluate themselves by comparison with other people. But our sin is seen differently when we see it in contrast to God’s holiness. By this standard, we all “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

In the Old Testament, God gave his people laws, such as the Ten Commandments, to guide them toward lives that would honor him. But his laws could not remove human sin; rather, they highlighted our need for God’s forgiveness. The Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when God would do something remarkable for his people. The Prophet Isaiah declared, “By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11). God would send someone who would not only bear the iniquities (sins) of his people but would also provide for them to be considered righteous (to be “justified,” or made acceptable to God) in his eyes. That someone was Jesus.

God’s Solution

Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has always existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Apostle John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).” The “Word” refers to Christ, who left the glory of heaven to become a human being. John went on to write, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Later in the same chapter of his gospel, John writes of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Jesus lived a sinless life, something no other human had ever done. Then, at the appropriate time, he allowed himself to be arrested, brutally beaten, and crucified. In his death on the cross, Jesus, who was both fully God and fully man, fulfilled his role as the Lamb of God. He bore the punishment predicted by the Prophet Isaiah:

“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

However, Jesus’ death was not the end. His body was placed in a tomb, and on the third day he was raised, proving his deity and attesting to his authority to give eternal life. His suffering and resurrection were for us. He bore the punishment we deserved. He rose from death and offers eternal life to all who follow him. He did it all. But he calls us to respond.

Our Response

While Jesus has done everything necessary to secure our salvation, God calls us to receive what he has provided. We do this by faith. John wrote, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

What is faith? Biblical faith is more than mere belief that Jesus was a real person who was crucified, died, and rose again. It certainly includes that, but genuine faith is the belief that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was necessary for *your* sins to be forgiven.

This recognition of our need for forgiveness is related to what the Bible calls “repentance.” Repentance is the recognition that our sin is wrong and offensive to God and that we must turn away from it. Jesus called for repentance in his own preaching (Matthew 4:17, Luke 13:5) and he called for his disciples to preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins” as well (Luke 24:47).

Genuine faith includes belief and repentance that lead to a life of devotion to Jesus. The motivation for this devotion is gratitude - joyful appreciation for what Christ has done for us. Recognizing our need for forgiveness and recognizing what God has done to meet our need leads us to loving devotion as followers of Jesus.



Important Truths Often Missed by Nominal Christians

Much more could be said about the gospel, but these four points provide important pillars for a clear understanding of the good news. While a nominal Christian might embrace some of these ideas, there is likely a deficiency in understanding and personally applying some key component of the gospel.

God's Holiness and Our Sin

For example, some people who identify as Christians agree that God's nature is one of love, but they disregard his holiness, justice and wrath. They tend to think that God is much like themselves and that he is willing to overlook the occasional faults of others. But they fail to grasp that God is infinitely, utterly holy. They lack what the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord" – a high regard for his awesome holiness and perfection. This failure to grasp God's full nature leads to an inadequate understanding of our sin. Lacking this, they are unaware of the seriousness of our insurmountable problem – our sin before a perfectly holy God.

Nominal Christians sometimes think it is as if God has a set of scales on which our good deeds are measured against our bad ones. If the good outweighs the bad, we're in! But the Bible presents a very different picture. The Apostle James wrote, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). Just one sin disqualifies us from God's perfect righteousness. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

Those who are Christian in name only sometimes measure their goodness by comparison with other people. When we hear or read of the incredible amount of hatred and crime in our world, we think of ourselves as far better by comparison. If judged by the standard of comparison with others, the average person might be confident of his or her relative righteousness. However, Scripture paints a very different picture of our dilemma. Nowhere is it taught that we will be evaluated based on comparison with others. Rather, our personal sin must be considered in light of the glory and perfection of God himself. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Without an accurate picture of God's holiness, and of our sinfulness before him, we are not able to appreciate what the Lord has done to solve our problem. We can't grasp the immensity of his mercy unless we first grasp the depth of our need. A clear understanding of our dilemma prepares us to receive God's greatest gift – eternal salvation provided entirely by the work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus – Who He Is and What He Did

Every person who claims to be a Christian believes in Jesus. But many do not understand who he was and why he did what he did for us. Jesus was fully human, but he was also fully God. As a human being, he could take our place on the cross. He could pay our sin debt. As the Son of God, he was without sin. His sacrifice on the cross for us was of infinite value and sufficient to pay the penalty for the sins of all who would receive him.

Some nominal Christians also lack an accurate understanding of why Jesus died on the cross. Many assume that Christ was simply martyred by people who didn't like his teaching or the fact that he upset the religious hierarchy of his time. But Scripture is clear that Jesus' death on the cross was planned by God and purposeful. The Prophet Isaiah lived and prophesied over 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Regarding Christ, Isaiah said, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Isaiah noted that, "it was the will of the Lord to crush him" (Isaiah 53:10). He added, "by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:11). Jesus spoke often of his suffering on the cross. He told his disciples that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matthew 16:21). The Apostle Peter confirmed that Jesus fulfilled what he predicted and what was prophesied by Isaiah. Peter wrote, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

Faith and Repentance

There are some people who believe the biblical verses noted so far but are not truly Christians. That's because the gospel calls for a response of faith. Perhaps the greatest reason nominal Christians fail to experience God's salvation is that they do not understand what Scripture means by "faith."

Biblical faith certainly includes believing in Jesus as a real, historical person. It includes believing that he died on a cross and was raised on the third day. It includes believing that his death and resurrection were for us – to provide for our forgiveness, to credit us with his righteousness, and to give us eternal life. Believing these things is essential. But biblical faith includes more. Biblical faith leads to following Jesus as Lord. This means we have submitted our lives to Jesus' rule. We have put him in the driver's seat instead of ourselves. It certainly does not mean we are perfect, but rather that we are willing to do his will. And our Lord Jesus gives us the grace (enabling power) to do his will.

Possibly the most neglected component of biblical faith is repentance. When Jesus began to preach, he said "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus commissioned his disciples by reminding them that "repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The disciples obeyed. In his first public sermon, the Apostle Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The Apostle Paul described his own ministry as "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). So, repentance is not optional for those who come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

But what exactly is repentance? A commonly cited meaning for the word "repent" is "to change one's mind." This definition is based on the Greek word *metanoia*, and it points to the change in thinking that occurs with repentance. However, a fuller understanding of the meaning of repentance is based on the word's usage in Scripture. Biblical examples make it clear that repentance involves more than a change in how one thinks about God, ourselves, or our need for

forgiveness. Biblical repentance also involves a turning away from sin. Recognizing our sin against God, and realizing that we need his forgiveness, we turn from our sin, and we turn to him. We turn to him in the faith that he has provided for our forgiveness by the work of Jesus on the cross. With this understanding we can understand biblical repentance this way:

Repentance is a recognition of our sin against God and of his full provision for our forgiveness based on the work of Jesus Christ. Biblical repentance involves a turning away from our sin in submission to God and his ways.

Repentance is not a religious effort to reach God. It cannot be worked up by human determination. Repentance is a work of God's grace, given by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to believe God's truth and to turn in faith to his rule in our lives. While the word "repent" sometimes has negative connotations in contemporary culture, we should always remember that repentance is a gift from God. The Apostle Paul notes this when he expresses hope that those opposed to the gospel will come to faith: "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

The points just presented may seem like a lot for a not-yet-Christian to understand. Is it necessary to know all this to be a Christian? What about the thief who died on the cross next to Jesus? He simply said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Jesus answered him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Doesn't this prove that a person can just ask Jesus for salvation and God will grant it?

The account of the thief on the cross provides us with a beautiful model of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. No good works were required for the thief to enter God's kingdom. Childlike faith in Jesus alone was necessary. However, the believing thief had a consciousness of his own sin and of his need before a holy God. Just before addressing Jesus, this thief had spoken to another thief who was being crucified saying, "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

Furthermore, the thief who called on Christ recognized the Lordship of Jesus. He knew Jesus would be alive after his death and would be ruling in his kingdom. His faith revealed his repentance as he acknowledged his own need for forgiveness and turned in humble trust to Jesus. If the repentant thief had lived, we would expect to have seen the fruit of a changed life as evidence of the salvation he had received by God's grace.

One does not need to be a theologian to receive God's salvation. A believing 3-year-old may say a prayer inviting Christ into her life and genuinely experience God's saving work. Salvation is God's work, brought about by the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in response to faith. Only the Lord knows the genuineness of one's faith. But genuine faith, even if initially expressed at 3-years old, will eventually result in following Jesus. The spiritual progress of some is rapid and dramatic. The growth of others is slower and less noticeable. But genuine trust in Jesus endures. Real faith leads to following Jesus as Lord. When faith is genuine, our lives will be marked by devotion to Christ and a desire to do His will. We will become more sensitive to our own sins, and the need to confess them to the Lord (1 John 1:9). While we may go through periods of spiritual dryness, our faith will ultimately endure, because God who calls us also keeps us. As scripture says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).



Two Common Counterfeits

Expecting Salvation by Good Works

If you grew up attending church, you may recognize the name of John Wesley. Born in England in 1703, Wesley attended Oxford in preparation for a career as a minister in the Church of England. He and several friends became known as the “Holy Club” for their rigorous disciplines in pursuit of a holy life. Wesley seemed to be among the most devoted Christians at Oxford, but he lacked assurance of salvation.

Wesley decided that committing himself to mission efforts in America might help him gain the assurance he needed. He made plans to travel to Savannah, Georgia to work among the American Indians. Wesley wrote: “My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen.”¹

Things in America did not go as Wesley had hoped, and in 1738 he returned to England. The greatest event of Wesley’s life occurred on May 24, 1738. He attended a worship service in a small chapel in Aldersgate Street, London, where someone read from Martin Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Regarding that time, Wesley wrote, “About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ; Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”²

Finally, John Wesley had the assurance he sought. He had gained by simple faith what he had been unable to attain by disciplined religious effort. His good works would now be a response of loving gratitude to the God who had provided everything for his salvation. His life would be a living illustration of the clear teaching of the Apostle Paul, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for

1 Murray, Iain, *Wesley and the Men Who Followed* (Edinburg: The Banner of Truth Trust), 7.
2 Churnock, Nehemiah, *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), 51.

good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

John Wesley’s example of trying to attain salvation by religious works may seem extreme, but a belief in salvation by good works is ingrained in the minds of many. Relying on our own efforts to attain salvation is a form of self-righteousness – something Jesus encountered often with the religious legalists of his time, the Pharisees. Christ told this parable to stress the futility of self-righteousness in trying to reach a holy God:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14).

Jesus’ parable teaches us that God opposes the self-righteous, but rewards those who seek him humbly. None of us can reach God by our good works. Recognizing our inability to save ourselves, we must humbly repent of our sins and turn in faith to Jesus. Acknowledging our complete dependence upon Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the dead to save us, we commit ourselves to him, receiving him as our Savior and Lord.

Expecting Salvation without Devotion to Jesus as Lord

It is a terrible mistake to think you can receive God’s salvation without receiving Jesus as Lord. During his earthly ministry, Jesus never pressured people to “just say a prayer.” He never twisted arms to get people to acknowledge who he was. Instead, Jesus called for followers - those who were willing to forsake all - to follow him.

A wealthy ruler asked Jesus an important question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life” (Luke 18:18). Jesus, seeing that the man’s money was his idol, said, “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). Jesus’ disciples were shocked by such a call to commitment. They asked, “Then who can be saved” (Luke 18:26)? Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

There is a wealth of hope in Jesus’ reply. We cannot make ourselves devoted followers of Jesus, but God can. We cannot identify all the things in our lives that might keep us from faithfully following Jesus, but God will. He provides his grace to enable us to place our faith in Christ and become his followers. And his grace will keep us as we grow in devotion to his Lordship throughout our lives.

No one should presume to call Jesus “Lord” without understanding what it means for him to be Lord. Surrender to Christ is clearly implied, and this can come with a cost. Jesus cautioned people about following him without counting the cost. When he saw great crowds accompanying him, he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

What did Jesus mean by these challenging words? Christ is using what is known as an idiom of preference. He is not calling his followers to hate family members or anyone else. He is simply making the point that our devotion to him must surpass all other loves. He must be first in our lives – over parents, siblings, spouses, children, and ourselves. Jesus’ words have been life-giving to countless believers throughout history who have been rejected by their families because they chose to follow Christ. While his words may seem strange, even harsh, to our ears, they have brought comfort to many who have put Christ first and paid the steep price of the loss of family relationships.

The Lord gives great encouragement to those who would forsake much to follow him as Lord. Having heard Jesus’ words to the wealthy ruler, Peter said to him, “See, we have left our homes and followed you” (Luke 18:28). Jesus replied, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or

children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).

As we consider what it means to truly receive God’s salvation, we must avoid the two common counterfeits of depending upon our works and of disregarding Jesus’ Lordship. The first error exalts ourselves. The second disregards who Jesus is. Receiving eternal life calls for humbly acknowledging our sin and recognizing that we could never be good enough to save ourselves. We turn in faith to the One who paid our sin debt and provided us with eternal life. Recognizing who he is, we come to him as Lord and gratefully submit to his rule and reign in our lives. When we have come to him with such childlike trust, we need not fear ever being cast away from his presence, for he keeps those who are his own (John 10:28).



Being Sure

My pastor for many years was a former evangelist. Dr. Richard Little had travelled for years preaching evangelistic messages in churches before settling into a pastorate. During his travels to numerous churches, Pastor Little had seen hundreds of people come to faith in Christ. Many of these were individuals who assumed they were Christians before hearing him speak. So, I was not surprised when I heard Pastor Little proclaim, “The biggest cult in America is nominal Christianity!” I knew he spoke from vast experience in addressing the spiritual needs of church-going people. Many of these had been lulled into spiritual complacency by a false assurance of acceptance by God. They needed to be awakened to the danger of religion without new life – a “faith” that was not genuine.

Scripture calls us to assess the genuineness of our faith. The Apostle Paul gave both assurance and caution to the Corinthians when he wrote, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). In a later letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

How can we be sure we have not “believed in vain?” How can we be certain we are really “in the faith?” The most important way to assess the genuineness of our faith is to make sure we understand the foundational truths of the gospel. We should remember that God is holy, and we are sinful. Despite our best efforts, we cannot save ourselves. We should know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, gave his sinless life on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. His death and resurrection provide eternal life for us. As Scripture says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Understanding this, we repent – we turn from our sin in gratitude and submission to Jesus as “our Lord.” When tempted to doubt our salvation (and this is not uncommon among Christians), we should return to the foundational truths of the gospel. We should recognize that our salvation was provided wholly by God, and that we can add nothing to it. Our faith then rests not on ourselves, but on the faithfulness of God.

Another way to evaluate the genuineness of our faith is by looking for the evidence of spiritual fruit. Fruit is a biblical word for outward evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are considered "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22). These qualities develop more quickly in some than in others, and none of us display them perfectly. However, faith that is genuine will ultimately be shown by fruit. It is important to remember that fruit is an outcome of genuine faith and not the way to attain genuine faith. As was noted by leaders of the Protestant Reformation, we are justified (declared righteous by God) by faith alone, but faith that justifies is never alone. As the book of James says, "Faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). Fruit follows faith.

A helpful place for assessing the genuineness of our faith is the biblical book of 1 John. John reminds us that believers in Jesus still sin, but we have a remedy for our failures, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). John goes on to note several things we could consider evidence of genuine faith:

- We want to obey God's commands (1 John 2:3).
- We no longer willfully make a practice of sinning (1 John 3:4-6).
- We walk in love (1 John 3:14, 4).
- We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us (1 John 3:24, 4:13).

Finally, use caution against becoming overly introspective in evaluating your faith. Don't focus on your own failures - we all have plenty of them! Focus instead on the faithfulness of God shown to us in the gospel. If you have embraced the gospel as best you know how, move forward in faith and trust God to bring you growing assurance. Be encouraged by the words John writes near the end of his short letter, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). God wants us to be assured in our faith so we can confidently help others to receive the salvation we enjoy.



Conclusion

My purpose in writing this booklet is to help guide those whose faith may be less than genuine to an experience of true, saving faith. I hope to help any who have a false assurance to come to genuine assurance. If you are uncertain about the genuineness of your faith, I would encourage you to first revisit the foundational truths of the gospel. Be sure you understand why Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead. Acknowledge your need for his forgiveness with the willingness to let him change you. Understand that he is calling you to more than intellectual assent, but to true devotion to him as Lord.

A good biblical foundation for gaining assurance in your relationship with God is Romans 10:9 which states, “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.” This verse notes the importance of belief in Jesus that results in declaring him as “Lord.” It reminds us that true faith results in following Jesus. If you are not sure whether you have taken this step of faith, consider expressing your belief and desire to become a follower of Jesus with the prayer below.

“Dear God, I acknowledge that I am a sinner and I need your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins. I believe he was raised from the dead. I’m sorry for my sins. I turn away from them and I turn to you. I ask you to receive me as your own. By faith I acknowledge that Jesus is my Lord. Please help me to follow you faithfully throughout life. Thank you for your great gift of salvation my Lord and my God. Amen.”

When we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ, we need not fear losing our salvation. Our good deeds did not gain our acceptance with God, and our lack of good deeds will not cost it. We are saved by God’s grace, and we will be kept by his grace. But the One who keeps us also calls us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). God enables us to grow by giving us his own Spirit to dwell within us. May the Holy Spirit keep you growing in his grace and knowledge until the day when you see him face to face!

*“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen”
(Jude 24-25).*



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