

When I look back on our old studies in John's Gospel, I'm reminded that many people had some kind of relationship with Jesus. Great crowds came to Him believing He was the messiah. They even followed Him for a time. They believed—so, why weren't they saved?

As we wrap up another session, the greatest issue isn't political but spiritual. What kind of belief saves? Do I have that kind of belief in Jesus?

According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, 52% of Illinois residents identify themselves as Christian. What's meant by "Christian" varies greatly, but nonetheless, most in our state would say they believe something about Jesus. They may be very sincere, but isn't it possible to be sincerely wrong?

Do you remember when Jesus cleared the temple (John 2:14-21)? It was at the start of His ministry. The Sadducees ran the temple like a racket, and the people suffered. Here they saw Jesus, this newcomer, enter the courtyard, furiously condemning their leaders. They loved it; and seeing Jesus' miraculous signs, John says that they "believed in His name" (John 2:23).

That sounds positive, but Jesus could peer into the heart, and what He often saw was a false belief. Yes, this crowd in Judea believed in Him, but John adds that "Jesus did not believe in them." They were elated that He might be their messiah, but what they expected was a savior from the tyranny of Rome. They fell in love with an idea, and when Jesus eventually shattered that idea, they left Him.

It was common throughout Jesus' ministry to see people believe in Him only to reject Him at a later time. False belief is also seen in the more serious types, the kind who might have prayed a prayer, walked an aisle, made a commitment, or signed a pledge card. Jesus said to some who were really serious about Him that, "many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you'" (Matt 7:22-23).

Never knew you? How could that be? These people believed in Him and regularly served. They were models of service, but their faith wasn't so much in Jesus as in themselves. *Lord, Lord, look at all the good things I did for You!* Their good works made them confident they would surely be saved.

The difference between true and false belief as seen in the Gospels isn't that one is pro-Jesus while the other isn't. It isn't that one is more moral than the other (there are many moral unbelievers). A true believer loves Christ. Out of this love, He desires to live a life that honors Him.

This really shouldn't be controversial. It only makes sense to say that what we believe affects how we live. Where there's no change of life, no desire to please God or ever honor Him in any tangible way, why would we say, "But I'm certain that person knows Christ"? It seems more reasonable to say, "That man needs Christ" (James 2:14-19).

WHAT TO BELIEVE

How Jesus handled the crowds tells us there are right beliefs and wrong beliefs about Him. It actually matters what a person believes if he's to be saved.

The Bible teaches that God is holy; we are not. That's the problem, and it's the reason we need a Savior. When Adam fell into sin, the heart of man became corrupt and darkened. It suddenly wanted to walk away from God (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:10-18; Eph 4:17-19).

Isaiah 64:6—We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

Relative to one another, we do many good deeds. Isaiah 64:6 isn't sizing us up against one another, but against God Himself. With respect to God, the absolute standard, we fall short—so short that even our best deeds are filthy in His presence.

THE GOSPEL IS NOT 'GIVE ME YOUR VIRTUE AND I WILL CROWN IT WITH GRACE' BUT 'DESPISE YOUR SIN AND I WILL SHOWER YOU WITH MERCY.'

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Where does that leave us? We sin, and we keep on sinning against God. Any who want to make things right, can't. There's no way to take back our sins, dilute them with good works, or even pay for them on our own—it would require an eternity! So, it's hopeless. There's no way that you and I can right things with God.

True Belief

Romans 5:8—“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

The Father sent His Son to die in the place of all who would be saved. Someone had to pay for your sin and mine. So, either we pay for it ourselves forever or a substitute pays for it on our behalf.

Christ offered Himself to the Father as our perfect sacrifice (Eph 2:4). He receives our sin; we receive His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). We were sinners, but become saints with a clean slate at the instant of salvation (John 19:30; Heb 9:24-26).

Saints? A saint isn't a special class of Christian. In fact, the apostle Paul addressed his letters to saints (Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1). He wrote to regular church-going believers in various cities. Anyone who's saved is a saint. It's the new identity of a Christian.

A Christian still sins, but he or she now desires to please God. It's a change worked within the heart, a new desire that begins to grow. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God's people begin to learn how to live less like sinners and more like the saints they've become (2 Thes 2:13; Titus 3:5).

A TRANSFORMED HEART

Is true belief just a matter of having the right beliefs? No. There's a number of churches mentioned in Revelation, and one of them was in Ephesus. It was a church full of good doctrine, and yet, it was a dead church. In fact, this church was also filled with service. That didn't matter, either. Right beliefs and good works are important, but the problem in Ephesus was an absence of love for Christ Himself (Rev 2:4). Externally, it was a perfect church. Internally, no love for Jesus Christ.

Ephesus is a stark reminder that God looks at the heart. Consider the Pharisees who regularly fasted and prayed. Why wasn't the Lord

pleased with them? One reason was because they liked to be seen by others (Matt 6:1, 5, 16). They didn't love God so much as they loved the praise of men.

In John 14:15 Jesus said to His disciples, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Obedience follows love. It's not a perfect obedience by any means, but a Christian loves Jesus Christ. And what does it mean to love someone other than to please them? Such a strange thing for a person to claim Christ while actively displeasing Him.

As Paul said to the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5). The church in this city had many Christians living immorally. Were they saved? Was their faith true? Maybe. Some responded to Paul's confrontation and turned from their sins (2 Cor 7:9-11). Yet, he was grieved by the thought that many hadn't (2 Cor 12:21). It's hard to say that a person loves Christ after knowing what pleases Christ and then rejecting it.

Psalm 42:1-2—As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

What does it take to have a heart that loves God? A miracle. God has to graciously reach down to change the heart, impart life, give His Spirit, and call a person to follow Him (John 6:37). Salvation doesn't come by us conjuring up love in our hearts for God, but God working that love within.

When Jesus called people to follow, He wanted them to believe rightly about Him, to turn from sin and then live a life that honors Him. His is a kingdom built not by coercion and the sword but by love, and it's filled with a people who love to serve Him as their King.