

What It Takes to Be a Christian

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Introduction.

- A. Last week, Lauren and I went out with some other folks after services to get some pizza. After I, at least, ate much more pizza than I should have, we were sitting around talking, and the topic of conversation turned to spiritual things, more specifically, the misperceptions that some Christians and non-Christians alike have about what it means to be a child of God. From somewhere, we get this idea that REAL Christians are basically spiritual super-beings, and unless we're that way too, we can't be real Christians.
- B. This misconception is actually quite reasonable, and it arises from two main sources. The first source is that most of us see other Christians the most when we and they are at church. They come into the building carrying their Bibles, and they're happy, and they're smiling, and they have all of these thoughtful comments in Bible class, and we assume that they're like that all the time. By contrast, all of us know that we ourselves AREN'T on our best church behavior all the time, so we're convinced that everybody else is better than we are.
- C. Similarly, we get the idea that we can't be good Christians from our attitude toward the word. There are a million different things the Bible has to teach us, and when we compare our lives to what the Bible says we should be like, we see a lot of areas where we don't measure up, so we feel like we have failed as Christians.
- D. Now, we certainly should grieve for our sins, but we must be careful not to turn Christianity into the Law of Moses, Part Two. We must not believe that we can't be Christians unless we attain to a perfect standard of righteousness. Brethren, nobody lives like that! Not even the best Christians in the world live like that! We need to get rid of this. It can prevent us from ever becoming Christians if we aren't already, and it can cripple us if we are. Let's turn to God's word this morning, then, to learn about what it really takes to be a Christian.

I. It Doesn't Take:

- A. As we consider this idea, we must begin by looking at our misconceptions in detail, by looking at all of the things that it doesn't take to be a Christian. The first of these is **A PERFECT PAST**. Sometimes people get the idea that being accepted by God as His child is like getting into Harvard, that you have to go through this rigorous admissions process, and if you've got a blemish on your record anywhere, then you're doomed. As a result, they think they're not ready to become Christians yet because they're doing all of these sinful things, and they need some time to get their spiritual grades up before they take the plunge.
- B. The problem with this way of thinking is that it puts the burden of our righteousness on ourselves and not on God. Brethren, we cannot perfect ourselves. It is God who perfects us, and He only does that once we become Christians. Look at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 11. God is not like Harvard! He doesn't take the self-proclaimed spiritual elite, those who trust in their own righteousness. Instead, God has chosen those who admit that they are NOT righteous and therefore need His help. Brethren, who we are when we become Christians is irrelevant. It's where we're headed that's important.
- C. Next, we need to recognize that it doesn't take **A PERFECT UNDERSTANDING** to be a Christian. Sometimes, it seems like this is another big hangup to people getting baptized. They say, "I don't know anything yet," and in their own minds, they have to attain to some high level of knowledge before they become Christians. The fact of the matter is, folks, that we don't have to know much at all to attain salvation. Really, we can boil it down to about four things. First, we have to believe that God exists. Second, we have to believe that the Bible is His word. Third, we have to recognize that we have sinned and that we stand condemned by God's law. Fourth, we have to believe that our sin can be washed away by the atoning blood of Jesus if we follow God's plan of salvation. That's about all it takes to become a Christian.
- D. Really, spiritual knowledge is something we're to pursue primarily after we become Christians, not before. Look at what Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:1-2. It's God's word that causes spiritual growth in us, and this continues throughout our Christian lives, because we can never learn everything. Let me tell you: I loved having Brother Ferris here a couple weeks ago because listening to him showed me how much I still have to learn. To become children of God, we don't have to know everything. We just have to know enough.
- E. It is similarly true that being a Christian doesn't take **A PERFECT LOVE**. This is kind of a subtle one, but it's important. A lot of the time, those who are considering becoming Christians hear established, mature Christians talking about how much they love God and what a great relationship they have with Him. So the non-Christian hears this, and he thinks to himself, "I don't have that kind of love for God. That means that I must not be ready to be a Christian yet." The thing is, though, that genuine love comes from getting to know someone. That's why you hear old married couples say, "We love each other more now than we did when we got married," because now, they know each other much better than they did when they got married. Our love for God is the same way. It's based on our knowledge of Him, and it's impossible to get to know God in a deeper way, and thus have a deeper love, without becoming a Christian first.

- F. The significant love when we become a Christian is not the love we feel for a God we don't even know yet, but the love that God feels for us even though He does know us. Look at what John writes in 1 John 4:10. Certainly, it's important to learn to love God, but that's a lifelong process, and one we will never complete. What's more significant is the love God has for us which allows us to come to Him in the first place.
- G. Finally, it doesn't take **A PERFECT LIFE** to be a Christian. This misconception is similar to the one we looked at about having to have a perfect past, but it's forward-looking instead of backward-looking. This one says, "I'd better not become a Christian because I'm afraid I'm going to sin after I get baptized." And so, some people put off being baptized until they feel more spiritually ready. The problem with this way of thinking is that nobody, whether Christian or non-Christian, gets to the point where he stops sinning.
- H. Now, this is not to say that it's OK to sin. Sin is horrible and evil, and all of us should fight against it with everything we've got. The thing is, though, that Satan is an extremely clever opponent, and sooner or later, he's going to hit us with some temptation that we'll give in to. All of us are going to sin, but the fact of our sin is precisely why Jesus died. Consider what John says in 1 John 1:7-9. Even though we do sin, as long as our lives are dedicated to serving God, which is what John means by "walking in the light," then the blood of Christ will cleanse us from our sins whenever we ask forgiveness. We are not a perfect people. We are a perfected people, and it is the grace that we have through Jesus that perfects us.

II. It Does Take:

- A. However, none of this means that nothing is required in order to be a Christian. Indeed, there are some things that being a Christian does take. The first of these is **VISION**. This is what Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. Basically, there are two kinds of people in the world: those whose vision is limited to the things that are seen, and those whose vision extends also to the things that are not seen. The first kind of person is fixated on the material world. He wants money, possessions, the things that make him happy, and he's not interested in anything beyond that. The person who can see the unseen things knows that there's more to life than just toys and pleasure. He knows that what happens to us after we die is more important than what happens to us while we're alive, and he's willing to work now to secure eternity for himself later.
- B. The second thing that it takes to be a Christian is **HUMILITY**. Consider, for instance, the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:2-4. In this passage, Jesus says that humility is an absolute prerequisite for becoming His disciple. In practical terms, this is because only the humble do become disciples of Jesus. Humility means that we are willing to put aside our own wills—our own thoughts, desires, and so on—and submit ourselves to the will of God. Humility means that we obey. In fact, the single biggest problem with the denominational world is that it lacks humility. Certainly, the denominations make all sorts of noise about loving God and wanting to serve Him, but when we get right down to it, that's not what they actually do. They don't submit to the will of God as it is revealed in His word. They have all these other ideas instead about everything from salvation to worship to church organization, and they arrogantly choose to follow their own plans instead of following God. They've got a humility problem. By contrast, the one who comes to God doesn't argue with the Bible about what he should do. He doesn't make up his own rules that he thinks will work better. Instead, he humbly turns to God's word, reads what God has written, and obeys it to claim the salvation that the proud will never know. Then, throughout the rest of his life, he continues to express humility by striving—sometimes struggling—to do what God has told him to do; no more, no less. That's the humility of the Christian.
- C. Third, it takes **COMMITMENT** to be a Christian. This is the point of Hebrews 12:1-2. When we decide to become a Christian, we have to be resolved to see it through. That doesn't mean that we'll never sin again, but it does mean that we'll spend our lives in seeking God. In that sense, Christians are like rivers. Have you ever seen a river on a map that flowed exactly straight into the ocean? Of course not; the natural world isn't that tidy. Instead, the river weaves back and forth, going out of its direct path as it navigates various obstacles. The whole time, though, the river's headed to the same place. It's headed to the sea. That's the way we are as Christians. None of us take the straightest possible path to heaven. Only Christ did that. We let Satan put all kinds of obstacles in our path that divert us from our goal. Overall, though, we're still going toward it. Overall, we're still headed for eternal life with God, and that's what it means to have commitment.
- D. Finally, though, it takes **FAITH** to be a Christian, and I saved this one for last because it is perhaps the most important. All of the things that we looked at earlier are in a way an expression of the opposite point of view—that we should try to save ourselves through our own merit. If we let our search for our own perfection hold us back from coming to the Lord, we're missing the point of the plan of salvation. Our own righteousness doesn't save us; instead, God counts us as righteous because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Consider Paul's words in Romans 5:1-2. If we have faith in Jesus and act on the basis of our faith, because of that faith, we have access to God's grace. Because of this favor that God has bestowed on His people, even though we don't deserve it, we have the sure hope that we will live forever with Him in heaven. This doesn't happen because we are able to make ourselves perfectly righteous. It happens because we trust God to do it for us.

Conclusion. If you have what it takes to be a Christian and desire the grace of God, come to Him today.