

## THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

by Andy Manning

I want to ask you the most important question anyone will ever ask you. But before we get to the most important question, let me ask you this: Did you know that it's possible to believe in Jesus but still go to hell? (I know. Some of you might not be sure that you believe in Jesus *or* hell at this point, but stick with me. This will help you understand the essence of true Christianity.) The reason why that question might surprise you is because the Bible is filled with verses like John 3:16, which state that God saves you, giving you forgiveness, eternal life, and a relationship with Himself when you *believe* in Jesus.

However, now that we've pulled out John 3:16, let's look at two other passages that should cause a little alarm to go off in your heart. Both prove that it's possible to believe in Jesus but still go to hell. John 3:16 says God saves you when you believe in Jesus, right? But look at **James 2:19**. "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror."<sup>1</sup> Demons are fallen angels that serve Satan in the battle against God. Demons believe in God, right? They believe in Jesus, right? But they are not saved. They don't have eternal life.

Now let's look at the words of Jesus in **Matthew 7:21-23**.

21 "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. 22 On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' 23 But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'

This is a case of people truly believing in Jesus but being denied entrance into heaven. They believed in Jesus, so much so that they prophesied and cast out demons and performed miracles in the name of Jesus, but they were not saved. They went to hell.

So you see? It's possible to believe in Jesus but still go to hell. And as I look around at our community (I've lived in Acadiana all but 3 years of my life), I see many people who fit into this category. I see many people who believe in Jesus but unless something changes, they will spend eternity separated from God. Acadiana is filled with church-going, religious people who

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believe in Jesus, who know all about Jesus, who are good, nice, moral people. But many of these people are going to hell.

You might say, “How can say that, Andy? You’re being highly judgmental.” It’s true that only God can truly know someone’s heart, but there’s a way that you can tell, almost without fail, whether or not a person has a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. I call it the most important question, because your answer to this question reveals your eternal destination. Your answer to this one question will reveal to you this morning whether you are headed to heaven or hell when you die.

To help you understand the most important question, we need to take a look at a passage of Scripture. The Bible says in **Ephesians 2:8-9**,

8 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. 9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

The reason why many people who believe in Jesus are going to hell is because they misunderstand salvation (the way that God saves a person from sin and grants them eternal life). There are four words in this passage that give us a proper understanding of salvation. Underline the word “grace,” the word “believed,” the phrase “good things,” and the word “boast.”

#### 4 WORDS TO UNDERSTAND SALVATION

##### 1. Grace.

The first word you need to get to understand salvation is “grace.”

“God saved you by his **grace**.”

What is grace? Here’s a helpful acronym: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Grace is God’s riches (salvation) given to you at Christ’s expense (rather than your own). Grace is unmerited favor. An unearned gift. It is God giving you what you don’t deserve.

Bottom line: Salvation is not something that you can earn. It’s not something that you can work for. It’s not something that you deserve. It’s not something that you can buy. It is a gift. You are saved by grace.

The reason many people misunderstand salvation is because they think they can earn salvation by being good or by being religious. Many people even think they deserve salvation. But if you deserved salvation, then it wouldn't be a work of grace. If you had to earn salvation, then it wouldn't be a work of grace.

Salvation is by grace. You don't deserve it. You can't earn it. It is a gift.

## 2. Believed.

The second word that you need to grasp in order to understand salvation is "believe."

"God saved you by his grace when you **believed**."

What does it mean to believe? To believe in Jesus is to depend on His sacrifice on the cross for your salvation.

Many people misunderstand salvation because they think the Biblical concept of belief means believing things about Jesus. For example, they think it means believing that Jesus is real; that Jesus is the Son of God; that Jesus died on the cross; that Jesus rose from the grave; that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. That's not Biblical belief, or saving faith. Again, even the demons believe those things. That kind of belief won't save you.

When you see the word "believe" as it relates to salvation it means to trust, to depend on, or to rely upon. It means trusting in, relying on, depending on Christ's death on the cross for your sins to save you. It means believing that His work on the cross on your behalf is your ticket to heaven.

The gospel or good news of Jesus Christ can be understood like this. God created you for a love relationship with Him. You chose to sin, and your sin separated you from God. Without Christ, the ultimate punishment for your sin is eternal separation from God – hell. In spite of your sin, God never stopped loving you. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, taking upon Himself the punishment you deserved. Then Jesus rose from the grave and is alive in Heaven today. Now, if you will believe in Jesus, or depend on the work of Christ on your behalf, you will be saved.

What is the connection between grace and belief, or grace and faith? A financial analogy might be helpful. Grace is God writing you a check for \$1 million. Faith is depositing the check into

your account. Grace means God gave you a ton of money for free! But it's not yours yet. You can't spend it. You can't enjoy it. Not until you deposit it into your account. That's where faith comes in. When you believe in or depend on Christ's cross for your salvation, God's free gift of salvation is deposited into your account.

### 3. Good things.

The third word (or phrase) that is essential to understanding salvation is "good things," or good deeds, or good works.

"9 Salvation is not a reward for the **good things** we have done...."

What are good things? Good things are works of love or obedience. A good thing can be anything from obeying a command in the Bible to giving money to the poor.

The Bible is clear that good things are important. Christ-followers are commanded to be good. We are commanded to be holy, to be loving, to help the poor, to obey the Scriptures, to avoid sin (e.g. Colossians 3:1-17). But therein lies the reason for the confusion. There is such an emphasis in the Bible on doing good things that many people think doing good things is what will save them.

There is an important connection between good things and salvation, but most people misunderstand that connection. Ephesians 2:9 makes it clear that salvation is not a reward for good things. Good things don't earn salvation. You may compare yourself to others and see that you've done more good things than anybody you know; it doesn't matter. Good things don't earn salvation. Salvation is a not a reward for the good things you've done.

What then is the connection between salvation and good things or good deeds or obedience? We are not saved by good deeds, but we are saved to do good deeds. When God saves you, He changes your heart, giving you the desire and the power to please Him. Once you are saved, you obey God because you love Him and want to serve Him and please Him. **Titus 2:11-12** makes this clear.

11 For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. 12 And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God.

Notice that salvation is by grace, which then results in good deeds and righteous living. Good deeds don't save. Salvation results in a life of good deeds.

#### 4. Boasting.

The fourth word that you need to see in order to understand salvation Biblically is "boasting."

"9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can **boast** about it."

To boast is to take some or all of the credit for your salvation. It is to believe that God saved you because He looked at you and said, "Huh! Impressive. Look at Sally. Look at all of her good deeds. Look at how hard she's trying. Look at how religious she is. She never misses church. She volunteers every week. She sits in the front row. She has a quiet time every day. Look at how nice she is. She always let's people get in front of her in line or in traffic. Look at her obedience. She doesn't get drunk. She is faithful to her husband. Wow! You know what? She makes the cut. I'm going to give it to her. Salvation granted. She deserves it!" Boasting is when you think that you actually had something to do with your salvation. The Bible is clear that you didn't. You had absolutely nothing to do with your salvation. You have nothing to boast about. It's all God and none of you.

If ever you are tempted to boast, just check out what the Bible says in **Galatians 3:10-11**.

10 But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in God's Book of the Law." 11 So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

This passage says that if you want to try to earn salvation by your good works, then you have to keep the law (all of God's commands) perfectly, without fail. Do that, then you can boast. If not, then you are under the curse of sin, and what you deserve is eternal separation from God in hell. Praise God that salvation is not by works but by grace through faith.

I heard it stated like this one time: "Heaven is a perfect place and only perfect people go there." Are you perfect? Then you better rely upon grace and faith instead of your performance (your aims at perfection).

Grace. Belief (or faith). Good things (or good works). And boasting. When you put all these concepts together here's what you learn about salvation:

**Salvation is freely given to those who depend on what Jesus Christ has done for them and put no hope in what they might do for God.**

Let me explain it in two ways. First of all, salvation is the difference between Do Vs. Done. Most people are believing in on depending on what they can do for God; but salvation is given to those who are believing in or depending on what Christ has done for them. Many people believe in Jesus, but their trust is in what they can do for God. Saving faith means depending on what Christ has done on your behalf.

Here's another way to look at it. Imagine me standing next to a chair. Believing that the chair exists is not the same as saving faith. Studying and learning all about the chair's history and composition is not the same as saving faith. Praying to the chair and singing worship songs to the chair is not the same as saving faith. Loving the chair and being a huge fan of the chair are not the same as saving faith. Only sitting in the chair, resting all of my weight on it, completely trusting in and depending on and hoping in and relying upon the chair is analogous to saving faith. In the same way, there are many people in Acadiana who believe that Jesus exists, they know all about Jesus, pray to Jesus and sing songs to Him and are huge Jesus fans, but they are going to hell because their faith is not in Jesus. They are not relying upon and depending on the work of Christ on their behalf to save them. They are still trusting in their own good works.

This is how Paul put it in a different passage. He wrote in **Philippians 3:3**, "We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort."

Now that you understand salvation Biblically, you're ready to hear what I call the most important question.

**If you died today, why would God allow you into heaven?**

Let me explain why that's the most important question. It's the most important question because it reveals whether or not you'll be saved. How? Because it reveals the object of your trust; the object of your faith. And ultimately that's what separates the saved from the unsaved. Either your trust is in your good works or your trust is in Christ's good works on your behalf.

Take a moment and jot down your answer to that question.

You could answer that question in one of two ways. First, you could say, “God would let me into heaven because I’m a good person; I was very active in church; I tried hard to live by the Bible; I’m better than everybody I know.” That answer reveals that the object of your trust is in yourself. You may or may not believe in Jesus, but in the end you aren’t relying upon Jesus for salvation; your hope is in yourself. If you are relying upon yourself, then you don’t have a Biblical understanding of salvation, and you are headed for eternity separated from God. You need to put your faith in Jesus today.

The second way, and the right way to answer that question is by saying, “God would let me into heaven because I trust in Christ’s death in my place for my sins for my salvation.” Where is your trust if that is your answer? It is in Jesus Christ and not in yourself.

So, what about you? What was your answer to the most important question? And what does your answer reveal about your eternity? The question is not *Do you believe in Jesus?* The question is *What are you depending on to save you?* What are you relying on? What are you hoping in? What are you banking on as your ticket to heaven? What you can do for God? Or what Christ has done for you?

What if the most important question revealed to you that your faith has been in works rather than in Christ? The solution is simple. Do exactly as Paul said in Philippians 3:3. First, **rely on what Jesus Christ has done for you.** Second, **put no confidence in human effort.** That takes a lot of humility. That means you must agree that you don’t deserve and cannot earn heaven. That apart from Christ, on your own you will spend eternity and hell separated from God. That the only thing you can do is to believe, or trust, or depend, or rely on Christ’s work on the cross for you.

If the most important question revealed that the object of your faith is misplaced, then you can place your trust in Christ right now and experience true salvation once and for all. All you need to do, if you truly believe in Jesus Christ, is to pray a prayer like this one:

“Jesus, I know I am a sinner, and I want to turn from my sins and follow You. I believe that You died for my sins and rose again, and I accept You as my Savior and King. Come into my life, Lord Jesus, give me new life, and help me to follow and obey You from this day forward. Amen.”