

November 20, 2011

John 20:24-31 / Romans 8:1-17 / I John 5:1-15

How Can I Know For Sure That I'm Saved?

Back in the late 1980's a group from another church came to my church in Westport to sing during one of our morning services. And I don't remember exactly what songs they sang, but I do remember that in one particular song a lady sang a solo about Jesus death on the cross that was absolutely beautiful.

So after the service (as the group was leaving) I went up to her and said: "That was beautiful. I do hope you'll be in my section when we get to heaven!"

And as soon as I said it: Her smile disappeared / her countenance fell / and she looked down toward the ground and said: "*Yeah... if I ever get there.*"

And before I could say anything else, she rushed to catch up with the rest of the group -- leaving me a bit taken back, and later, wishing I had said more.

I did discover some time later that she was raised in a denomination which teaches that one can never truly know if they are saved / and even suggests that it's an expression of prideful arrogance for a person to THINK they can KNOW FOR SURE that they're SAVED.

I also had two other people tell me they doubted they could ever be saved because they were convinced they'd committed "the unforgivable sin" of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit earlier in their lives (one by a sermon she'd heard & the other because of his own personal interpretation of)

Even William Cowper, the devote Christian man of faith, who was converted at 33 years of age / and went on to write such beautiful hymns as, "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood" and "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," struggled his entire Christian life to believe that he was truly saved.

As one biographer wrote: "***Throughout his life he was haunted by deep depressions and visions and voices and the overwhelming conviction that God had forsaken him and would doom him to hell.***" Such thoughts even drove him (on more than one occasion) to unsuccessful suicide attempts.

It's a case where we could only WISH that he had gained that precious "assurance of salvation," which the Bible says we can know. A gift God wants His Spirit-born, grace-adopted children, not only to have, but to relish.

Yet, having said that, I also need to say (as a pastor) that I believe churches today have gone too far to the opposite extreme. People today are often far too quick to give assurance of salvation to everyone only seconds after they've prayed a prayer / or simply said they believe. / And in doing so, have given assurance of salvation to people who are not yet saved.

It's a policy that has led to what many theologians have called, "***Evangelical churches that are full of unconverted evangelicals.***" People who think they are saved / and have been assured numerous times that they are saved / but show virtually no fruit whatsoever in their lives of actually being saved (other than the fact that they occasionally get involved in church activities and occasionally show up for morning worship).

But as one man has pointed out: "***Even a parrot can be trained to say he believes "Jesus is Lord," without being saved.***" / And as Billy Sunday frequently reminded people: "***Going to church no more makes a person a Christian, than walking into a garage makes them a car.***"

And believe me when I say that as a pastor it's hard to know what to do, because I DO WANT people who are truly saved to have assurance. I agree wholeheartedly with Evangeline Booth of the Salvation Army when she exclaimed: "***Oh what POWER assurance of salvation gives! When the individual can say, "I know." Not merely "I believe," but "I know!"***"

Therefore, she said, "***Persevere until you get it.***" For to know you have eternal life does strengthen the soul / dispel spirit-draining worry / fill the heart with joy / and change one's life!

Yet there's also a danger: For to give ASSURANCE OF SALVATION to a person who is not yet saved is to do them a great disservice, place them in great peril, and thwart the saving purposes of God in their soul.

By assuring a person they are saved when they are not, can soothe or numb the anxious concern the Holy Spirit has been prompting within them as He convicts them in regard to sin and judgment and righteousness and the wrath they stand under so long as they remain outside of Christ.

I have many friends & relatives in New England, who, because of the universalism proclaimed in nearly every mainline church in that region, are assured them beyond any doubt that they and everyone else will ultimately be saved regardless of what they do / what they believe / or who they believe in.

They'll even mock, snicker, and look down upon you as ignorant if you dare to suggest that people must trust in Jesus to be saved.

So what is my policy in this regard? ***I have NEVER given anyone a 100% assurance that they are saved -- though some have asked me to -- because it's not my place to do that.*** That's something they need to work out in their own soul, between them / God / and His Word / and no one else.

In my church in Honduras I had a young lady who had been a missionary to Bolivia come to me with severe doubts about her salvation. And I mean she earnestly and truly (with tears in her eyes) doubted her salvation.

My own personal conviction (from knowing her) was that she was saved. But she herself lacked that inner conviction / and could not shake her doubts, primarily (I believe) because she went to a Bible School which taught one could lose their salvation by committing a premeditated sin after they've been saved.

So, instead of trying to convince her that I thought she was saved (which would really only help until some other pastor came along and suggested she might not be) – I simply gave her my copy of Jonathan Edward's classic work, entitled: **"The Five Distinguishing Marks of True Conversion."**

And with a smile, and yet a tone of seriousness (because I was more convinced she was saved than she was) I said to her: ***"Aida, if you can read that book and still believe you're saved, you probably are."***

You see, because salvation is a matter of believing in your heart that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:10) -- and I can't see into your heart to see if saving faith resides there / and since its ultimately a matter of His love and His Spirit being poured out into a person's soul -- and I can't see into your soul / I can NEVER KNOW FOR SURE if someone is truly saved. I can't.

The only thing I CAN DO with complete confidence, is point people to what the Bible says, and then say: "***IF this is true of you...***" / or "***THIS is true of you...***" / or "***THIS is true of you,***" then God would want you to have the assurance that you are saved.

So what I'd like to do for the remainder of our time together, is simply share what I believe to be the SIX distinguishing marks of true conversion and then let you wrestle with God / and what He says in His Word / as to whether you are saved or not.

If you are saved my hope is that you would receive an assurance of your salvation in full. But if you are not yet saved my hope is that God would so unsettle your spirit / and make you so concerned and so anxious about your lost state and the wrath that remains upon you as a result / that you would flee to Jesus Christ with great speed and be saved.

So what are the SIX distinguishing marks of the truly saved person? FIRST, there is the elevation of esteem for Jesus, that not only sees Him as Savior, and Lord, and Redeemer -- God the Son, and the second person of the Triune Godhead -- but also sees Him as the soul's treasure of supreme worth.

The saved have found in Him a beauty that captivates, delights and satisfies the deepest longings of their soul. An inner persuasion and undaunted conviction that His value and worth to their soul cannot be matched or surpassed by anyone or anything else. A conviction that causes you to affirm with the apostle Paul, "***I count all things as dung compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.***"

I've mentioned this statement by Prof. John Hannah of Dallas Theological Seminary on other occasions, but it deserves being repeated here. I don't

remember much of what he shared when he spoke on "The Life of Jonathan Edwards" at the Dartmouth Bible Church in Dartmouth, Massachusetts.

But I do remember (and have since memorized) a remark he made in regard to this very topic of assurance. He said: ***"The day you find anything more beautiful than Jesus, is the day you can know you never knew Jesus."***
The Bible would agree!

Jesus Himself, speaking of the KOG in Mt. 13, said: ***"The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had so he could buy that field."***

And lest we miss the point: We need to see that in the NT the "kingdom" is synonymous with "Jesus." / Wherever HE is the kingdom is and whoever has HIM possesses the Kingdom as well. / He is the King whose presence and power and rule signal the presence and power and rule of the kingdom!

Thus, its Jesus way of saying that one of the signs that a person is truly converted soul is that they suddenly see the matchless worth and value and treasure that He is / and would be willing to sacrifice everything else in order to have Him.

Is that true of you? Do you love Jesus more than anything or anyone else? / Has your heart been captivated and enraptured by the beauty and majesty and grandeur of ALL that He is? / Is He the matchless treasure of incomparable worth in your life? / Does your soul now see everything else as dung in comparison to the surpassing worth on Knowing Him as Lord? If so, then you can be pretty sure you are saved.

Then **SECOND** you can be pretty sure you are saved if the empowering presence and work of the Holy Spirit in your heart has caused you to oppose and seek to turn from all known sin in your life, because you have become convinced that God hates it / and Christ suffered and died such a horrible death to pay its penalty. It's become a matter of gratitude and the honor of God's name.

You see, contrary to common belief, MERE MORALITY is not a trustworthy sign of a saved person. The Pharisee in Luke 12:9-14 was more moral than most men, yet Jesus said that because he placed his confidence for salvation in His own righteousness, he would not be justified or saved. Morality alone, as Jesus makes clear, saves no one.

My dad was one of the most moral men I knew (his nickname was "Honest John"). Yet he was an unbeliever / and under the wrath of God / and on his way to hell -- despite his morality -- until at 78 years old he trusted in Jesus and was converted.

LISTEN: Jesus said of the morality of the Pharisees: "***Unless your righteousness EXCEEDS that of the Pharisees, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.***" Because what God desires and requires is NEVER mere morality. It is Spirit-generated and Christ-exalting godliness and holiness. It's godliness whose goal is the honor of the One who has so graciously forgiven, pardoned and saved us.

Not only that, mere morality will never satisfy the heart or conscience of the truly saved person. Because the saved person doesn't simply want to be moral, they want to be clothed with the righteousness of Jesus, and reflect His love, His compassion, His humility and His God-ward life.

And you? Do you seek to be moral, or godly and holy? / Is your aim to be just a little bit more moral and upright than the typical American / or is it to emanate the grace of Jesus / and an otherworldly glory, "***that comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit?***" If it's the latter, then you can take heart that you are most likely saved.

Then **THIRD**, the next distinguishing mark of true conversion is an increased interest in God's Word, which includes a desire to know His will as laid out in it. A desire to know sound biblical doctrine and teach sound biblical doctrine and defend it against attacks. Truly converted people will want to learn and teach what the Bible teaches, rejecting worldly and man-centered teachings -- which false converts or the not-yet-converted often soak in and enjoy. And not only that, it includes a commitment to obey it and put it into practice.

For the person who does not care to learn and do the will of God (as revealed in the Bible) / has no reason or basis for believing they will be saved. Not because obedience saves us, but because obedience will ALWAYS flow from true faith. Not perfect obedience, but earnest obedience.

That was Jesus point in Mt.7:21-23 (where He attempted to unsettle the false assurance of those who thought they were saved but were not): ***"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, Depart from me you workers of iniquity; I never knew you."***

And it was on the basis of such verses that C. H. Spurgeon once said: ***"If the professed convert... does not mean to attend to [the revealed will of God], it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved."*** (Just as Jesus did).

Likewise, Peter tells us in II Peter 1:2-3: ***"[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness..."***

Then He goes on to say in verses 5-8: ***"For this very reason make every effort to add to your faith, goodness, and to goodness, knowledge, and to knowledge, self-control, and to self-control, perseverance, and to perseverance, godliness, and to godliness, brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you have these qualities in increasing measure you will not be ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of Jesus..."***

And then he adds in v. 11: ***"If you do these things you will never fall, and will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*** That is, by these acts of obedience (which are simply the fruits of true saving faith) you can gain the assurance of salvation.

And LISTEN: Neither Jesus nor Spurgeon nor myself are talking of perfect or flawless obedience. Such obedience is not possible in this life. But what Scripture is speaking of is this: That saving faith is living faith, and living faith

comes from exposure to the Word of God, and will always produce an earnest effort to obey. It's what Paul calls, ***“the obedience of faith.”***

Do you have such fruit? Are you making every effort to add to your faith, goodness, and to goodness, knowledge, and so forth and so on? Because if you are you can gain assurance that you are saved.

Then **FOURTH** we can gain the assurance of salvation if we have the testimony of the Spirit in our heart. The Spirit will testify with our spirits that we have become a child of God. Christ, says Paul, will dwell in our hearts by faith, because the Holy Spirit (who is the mediated presence of the Father and the Son to the believer) will dwell in our hearts.

In I John 5:12 we read: ***“God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”***

And to the one asking: *“How can I know if I have the Son?”* The answer was already given one chapter earlier (in 4:24): ***“And this is how we know that He (that is Jesus) lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us.”***

Do you have the Spirit? Have you received the gift the Father promised? Has God's Spirit testified with your spirit that you are a child of God? Does your heart cry out, "Abba Father"? If so -- if have the Spirit -- you can know you have eternal life.

Then **FIFTH** you can know you are saved if you not only have a deep love for Jesus, but a sincere love for people. Jesus says, ***“This is how they will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*** In Gal. 5:22 Paul tells us love is not only the primary ***“fruit of the Spirit,”*** and in I Cor. 13 he tells us love is the greatest and most elevated expression of Christian spirituality.

Without love, tongues are an irritating annoyance / prophesy means nothing / and extreme generosity as well as laying down your life for another gains you nothing.

And likewise, the apostle John, also speaking of love as the indispensable fruit of a truly saved soul, says in I John 4:7-8: ***“Dear friends, let us love one***

another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, but whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.

Or as we could justifiably put it: ***“An unloving Christian is a contradiction of terms. For a heart into which God has poured out His love cannot continue to be unloving.”***

You see, though many tend to downplay the absolutely indispensable need for love as a sign of true conversion / other than faith there are few things spoken of more than love as that which proves that one is truly converted. Since God IS love, the primary fruit of God’s presence in our lives is love.

And you? Is the fruit of love evident in your life? / Do you love the brethren? / Is your love earnest, sacrificial and sincere? / If so, you can be sure the Spirit of God has filled your soul – and if the Spirit of God lives within you, you can know you’ve been saved.

And of course, I couldn’t end without adding the **SIXTH** and **LAST** way to be sure one is saved. Jesus speaks of it in Matt. 24 where He talks of many turning away from the faith in the last times and then says: ***“He who perseveres to the end will be saved.”***

Yet the same truth applies across the board: You cannot turn away from the faith or Jesus and expect to be saved. As 1 John 3:19 says of those who turn from the faith: ***“They went out from us, but they did not belong to us, for if they had, they would have remained with us.”***

Those who abandon the faith for good and never return show they never were saved, for the truly saved, says Jesus, ***“persevere to the end.”*** They will "cling to Christ."

They will look to Jesus until their last breath, or until their faculties to do so give out!