

Christian Essential #1

FORGIVENESS

Forever from God

What Must I Believe to be Forgiven by God?

How Can I be Sure I am Forgiven by God?

Important Commitments for the Christian

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Scripture quotations are from the *New Living Translation* (NLT, Tyndale, 2007) unless otherwise noted. Other translations include *The New International Version* (NIV, Biblica, 2011) and *New American Standard Bible* (NASB, Lockman Foundation, 1995).

The contents of this study are in accordance with the Statements of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals (USA) and the Evangelical Fellowship of India.

FORGIVENESS

Forever from God

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Chapter 1.1

The Bad News about Humanity and the Good News about Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:18

Week 1

John Newton was a cruel and alcoholic slave trader in the 1700's. Ironically, he spent several years in Africa as a slave himself, after being abandoned by other slave traders because of his despicable character. But God revealed Himself to this great sinner. John's father sent a ship to rescue his son from slavery. However, on the return voyage, they encountered a fierce storm that was sinking the ship. John called out to God to save him and at that very moment some cargo shifted to plug a hole in the ship, saving the crew. This was the beginning of John's spiritual journey to become a Christian.

John Newton's conversion to Christianity resulted in him becoming an ordained minister and being a primary influence on the British government to abolish slave trading in 1807. He later wrote: "It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

John Newton is an example of the power of God's grace to transform a person's life. His life also reveals the power of God's grace to forgive even the worst of sinners. Which is why John Newton wrote the most popular hymn in all of Christian history: "Amazing Grace." John had experienced the grace of God promised in the Bible and described in this verse:

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God your Father. (1 Peter 3:18 ¹)

The *FORGIVENESS* study explains the bad news about your sins and the Good News about Jesus Christ's sacrifice for them.

A) The Gospel is the central message of Christianity

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the central message of Christianity. In the Christian New Testament (NT) writings, Gospel means "God's good news to humans about Jesus Christ." ² Why do humans need good news from God? Because He also has some very bad news for them: "*All people . . . are under the power of sin*" (Rom 3:9). Sin is breaking the laws of God.

The Bible teaches that sin has severe consequences for humanity. "*God shows his anger . . . against all sinful, wicked people*" (Rom 1:18). And if God never forgives them, "*They will be punished with eternal destruction*" (2 Thess 1:9). That's the bad news. Which is why the Gospel of Jesus Christ

is good news, even the very best news! Through trusting the Gospel of Jesus Christ, anyone can be completely forgiven forever for all their sin!

This is because, “*Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God.* (1 Pet 3:18). The *FORGIVENESS* study explains the bad news about your sins and the Good News about Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for them.

B) Introduction to the *FORGIVENESS* study

This study is for those seeking to understand how they can be forgiven by God. But it is also for Christians because, as stated above, the Good News about Jesus Christ is the essential message of Christianity. Finally, *FORGIVENESS* is a good orientation for those wanting to be baptized. The following is a summary of the topics in this study.

Section I: What Must I Believe to be Forgiven Forever by God? (chapters 1.2-1.5). These chapters are an explanation of both the bad news about your sins against God, and the Good News about Christ’s sacrifice to pay for your sins. They explain what Jesus and the Bible say about being completely forgiven forever by God and escaping His punishment for your sins.

Section II: How Can I be Sure I am Forgiven by God? (chapters 1.6-1.8). These chapters provide a biblical answer to this vital question. God wants a real Christian to be absolutely certain they are completely forgiven forever. And the Bible tells them how.

Section III: What are Important Commitments for the Christian? (chapters 1.9-1.10). These chapters explain the important commitment of water baptism and encourage a number of other vital practices for especially young Christians to understand.

C) Introduction to the *Christian Essentials* studies

The *FORGIVENESS* study is the first in a series of Christian training materials called the *Christian Essentials*. These are designed to help you understand, experience, and apply the word, ways, and will of God to your life. The *Christian Essentials* are available in both electronic and audio versions from the New Life Community Church website. ³ There is also a link there enabling you to order professionally printed versions of the studies.

The overall purpose of the *Christian Essentials* is reflected in the summary Bible verse for the series: “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Rom 12:2 NIV). That is an amazing promise from God! But it will require time and effort for it to be true of your life. These studies will help you do the work necessary to experience permanent and profound

change in your life by changing what you believe in your heart. This *FORGIVENESS* study consists of the following elements.

Weekly readings: There will usually be two short chapters each week to read. You will also be asked to answer a few questions from your reading to test your understanding of the key points. It will be helpful if you notice the questions at the beginning of the chapters and mark the answers as you read along. These readings will take about 30 minutes per week.

Weekly projects: For most weeks throughout the study you will be asked to do an activity that helps you put the readings into practice. The Bible says, “Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves” (Jas 1:22). The weekly projects help you do this. They require between a few minutes to an hour or more.

Group Times: You are encouraged to go through the *Christian Essentials* studies with a small group of 3-4 people. Spend part of the time talking about the weekly readings and Projects.

Memory verses: You are encouraged throughout the *Christian Essentials* to memorize the primary Bible verse for each chapter. You will be asked during your Barnabas Group to recite the verses for that week. Remember, the key to spiritual growth and power, and a primary purpose of these studies is to help you “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Rom 12:2). Memorizing God’s word helps you do this. You will find a list of the memory verses for this study in Appendix 1.A.

The primary Bible translation used in the *Christian Essentials* is the *New Living Translation* (NLT), unless otherwise noted. At times the *Dynamic English Version* (DEV) is used. It provides a more expanded and often clearer translation of the literal Greek and Hebrew texts of Scripture. Explanatory endnotes are usually provided for the DEV.

These studies are primarily designed to be used in a small group format. However, their structure also serves very well as a “sermon starter” for a church leader. Each chapter usually includes a beginning illustration, a primary biblical text, primary point, and three subpoints. A teacher is encouraged to add their own personal examples and practical applications.

Before using the *Christian Essentials* you are encouraged to get your Pastor’s approval before doing so. He is God’s helper for your spiritual growth and should be aware of your study through these materials.

May God the Father bless you greatly as you seek Him in the readings, discussions, and projects of the *Christian Essentials*. May you grow closer to God the Son and enjoy His friendship. And may you experience more of God the Holy Spirit and His supernatural love, joy, peace, and power.

► Memorize 1 Peter 3:18 in the translation above or another one.

► Read the next chapter to prepare for your discussion group this week.

- ¹ (1 Pet 3:18 DEV)- “*God your Father*” reflects which Person of the Trinity is being referred to.
- ² The word “Gospel” comes from the Old English word “gōdspel” meaning “good message.” Early English versions of the Bible used “gōdspel” to translate the ancient Greek word *euangelion* which means “good news” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament [BDAG]*). Therefore the word “Gospel” in the NT means “God’s good news to humans about Jesus Christ.”
- ³ Both electronic and audio versions of the *Christian Essentials* studies can be found at <https://newlifecr.com/christian-essentials/>.

Chapter 1.2

An Introduction to the World's Biggest Religion

John 14:6

Week 1

► After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- 1) What did Jesus claim was unique about Him? What do you think?
- 2) What do Christians claim is unique about the Bible? What do you think?
- 3) Why do Christians claim their love proves they know God? What do you think?
- 4) What was especially meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

In his extensive study, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History*, Dr. D. James Kennedy writes:

The morality of any society can be easily judged by the view it holds of human life. In 1844, H. L. Hastings visited the Fiji Islands. He found there that life was very cheap and that it was held in low esteem. You could buy a human being for \$7.00 or one musket! That was cheaper than a cow. After having bought him you could work him, whip him, starve him, or eat him, according to your preference—and many did the latter.

He returned a number of years later and found that the value of human life had risen tremendously. One could not buy a human being for \$7.00 to beat or eat. In fact, you could not buy one for seven million dollars. Why? Because across the Fiji Islands there were 1,200 Christian chapels where the Gospel of Christ had been proclaimed, and people had been taught that we are not our own; that we have been purchased with a price, not with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. ¹

Christians believe that the demonstration of such life-changing power through belief in Jesus Christ is evidence that Jesus was telling the truth when He said:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

This is one of the most remarkable statements Jesus Christ ever made. No other leader of a major world religion has ever said anything like it. It is one of many things that are unique about Christianity and its founder Jesus Christ. This chapter's main point is:

Christianity has a unique founder, beliefs, book, and love.

A) The unique person of Jesus Christ

A follower of Jesus asked Him how he could go to the Eternal Paradise of Heaven to be with God. Jesus said He was the only “*way*” to Heaven, that His teaching was the only “*truth*” about Heaven, and that He was the only one who could give someone eternal “*life*” (cf. John 14:5-6).

The Christian Bible says, “*There is salvation [from the punishment of God] in no one else [but Jesus]! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). And, “*There is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus*” (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus and His followers claimed He was the only way to Heaven.

Jesus made many unique claims like this. Therefore, if you take Him at His word, and consider His deeds, you cannot put Him in the same class as other leaders of major religions. For example, none of the leaders of major religions ever claimed to be God. But Jesus said, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen [God] the Father*” (John 14:9-10).

Buddha said, “I am only a teacher in search of the truth.” But over 100 times Jesus is recorded in the Bible beginning His statements with, “*I tell you the truth*” (cf. John 14:6).

Confucius said, “I never claimed to be holy.” But Jesus challenged even His enemies, “*Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?*” (John 8:46). And none could.

Mohammed knew he was a sinner and said, “Unless God throws his cloak of mercy over me, I have no hope.” But Jesus said He had, “*the authority on Earth to forgive sins*” (Matt 9:6).

None of these religious leaders were known for miracle working. But Jesus did amazing miracles everywhere He went. Jesus said:

“Don’t believe me unless I carry out my Father’s work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don’t believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father” (John 10:37-38)

And Christians believe that the unique miracle-working abilities of Jesus Christ is evidence that He alone came from God and spoke for Him.

Of course the greatest and most unique miracle about Jesus was His resurrection. Every other religious leader in the world has died and is still dead. But Jesus said, “*After three days I will rise from the dead*” (Matt 27:63), and He did!

To a group of religious leaders Jesus said:

“You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. . . . Unless you believe that I am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins. . . . I tell you the truth, anyone who obeys my teaching will never die!” (John 8:23, 51).

Statements like this led the Oxford Professor C. S. Lewis to remark:

I want to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing they often say about Jesus: ‘I am ready to accept Him as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is one thing we must not say.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Now it seems obvious to me that He was neither a lunatic nor a devil. Consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. ²

Likewise, the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte wrote:

I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every other person in the world there is no comparison. Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires; but on what foundation did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded an empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him. ³

Mahatma Gandhi described Jesus as, “A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.” ⁴

With such a unique and powerful founder, it is not surprising that Christianity is the largest religion in the world with over 2 billion claiming to be followers. ⁵ K. S. Latourette, Professor of History at Yale University wrote: “As the centuries pass, the evidence is accumulating that, measured by His effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet.” ⁶ We even divide human history by the birth of Christ (B. C. “before Christ” and A. D., Latin for *anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord”).

Therefore, it would seem worthwhile to understand what is unique about Christianity, and what it says about obtaining eternal life and reaching a perfect paradise called Heaven. Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Christianity has a unique founder, beliefs, book, and love.

B) The unique beliefs & book of Christianity

Jesus Christ and His followers teach the following 10 things that are unique to Christianity:

- 1) The Christian Bible is the only sure source of God's word to humans (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).
- 2) God is three perfectly united Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (cf. John 1:1-3, 18; 2 Cor 3:17-18; Matt 28:19).
- 3) God the Son, Jesus Christ, came to Earth by being born as a man through a virgin woman by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 1:20-23).
- 4) Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, sacrificed His life to pay for the sins of others, and rose from the dead to prove it (cf. John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Cor 15:3-8).
- 5) People cannot pay the penalty of their sins by doing good deeds (cf. Rom 3:20; Eph 2:8-9).
- 6) Trusting in Christ's death to pay for your sins is the only way to be forgiven by God (cf. John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5).
- 7) Christians are given eternal forgiveness and life that can never be taken from them, and they can be absolutely certain they possess these things and will go to eternal Paradise (cf. John 6:37-40; 1 John 5:13).
- 8) Followers of Christ are permanently indwelt with the Holy Spirit, recreating them spiritually, resulting in a new desire and supernatural ability to obey God and love people (cf. John 3:5-6; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; Gal 5:22-23).
- 9) There is an evil being called the Devil who, with his demons, invisibly deceives and rules the anti-Christian people of the world (cf. John 8:43-45; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 6:12; 1 John 3:8-10; 5:19).
- 10) Jesus Christ will come again, defeat all His enemies, and establish His righteous reign in a perfect Paradise on a New Earth forever (cf. Matt 24:29-31; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Rev 21:1-5).

Some of these beliefs reveal another uniqueness of Christianity. It is a loving relationship with God based on grace and acceptance, not a harsh religion based on fear and performance. Your forgiveness and acceptance from God are based on that relationship, not on following rules.

What are the beliefs of Christians based on? The Christian Bible of which the Apostle ⁷ Paul wrote: "*is inspired by God*" (2 Tim 3:16). The Bible is by far the most printed book in the world with 3 billion copies. ⁸ It is also by far the most translated book, being read in over 2000 languages. This is because the Bible has transformed more lives than any other book on Earth.

Why should you believe the Christian Bible contains words from God? First, the history of the events recorded in it have been confirmed by historians and archeologists. ⁹ The people described in the Bible were real

people, including Jesus Christ. Albert Einstein said, “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.”¹⁰

Secondly, nothing in science has disproved the Bible. In fact, the more you discover about Creation’s intricate design, the more evidence you have that God created the world just like the Bible teaches.¹¹

Thirdly, scholars have concluded that there are 737 predicted events in Scripture. Scholars have also demonstrated that over 600 of the Bible’s predictions have already come true exactly when and how they were supposed to. No other book or writings of the major religions contain fulfilled prophecies like the Christian Scriptures.¹² This is because only the Bible was inspired by God who alone can predict the future.

Over 100 of the fulfilled predictions in the Bible were perfectly fulfilled by Jesus Christ. For example, around 700 B.C. the Prophet Isaiah wrote: “*The Lord Himself will give you the [miraculous] sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')*” (Isa 7:14). About 700 years later Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, claiming and uniquely proving He was God in a human body.¹³

All of this is proof that the remaining 130 some prophecies in the Bible will also come true. These primarily refer to the Second Coming of Christ to gather and bless His followers and judge the rest of the world.

Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). **Christianity has a unique founder, beliefs, book, and love.**

C) The unique love of Christianity

The religion that has the most love is the most likely to be from God. Christians have proven to be among the most loving people in the world. Christians have started, served, and funded more hospitals, schools, orphanages, and relief agencies for natural disasters, famine, women’s rights, slavery, and poverty in the world than all other religions combined.

In the historical study quoted above, Dr. D. James Kennedy repeatedly documents his claim: “Despite its humble origins, the [Christian] Church has made more changes on earth for the good than any other movement or force [or religion] in history.”¹⁴ For example, it was Christians like John Newton and William Wilberforce in England and Abraham Lincoln in America that ended slavery in their countries and Christians are the most aggressive at working to end slavery around the world today.

History confirms that other religions often produce stagnant societies and even violent ones. But Christian nations are by far the most peaceful and prosperous. The example of Christianity’s impact on the Fiji Islands was described at the beginning of this chapter. No other religion in the world can claim even *one* such example. Not Buddhism, Hinduism,

Humanism, Islam, Marxism, or New Age. And the history of Christianity can boast of a multitude more of testimonies of transformed lives.

Jesus foretold to His followers: “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples* [followers]” (John 13:35). Perhaps you have experienced the unique love and kindness of a Christian. Of course there are too many people who claim to be Christians but do not act like it. As we will see later in this study, God forbids anyone to claim they are a Christian if they do not love people. Real Christians are the most patient, kind, hard-working, honest, and loving people you will know. C. S. Lewis described them in this way:

[Christians] are dotted here and there all over the earth. Every now and then one meets them. Their very voices and faces are different from ours: stronger, quieter, happier, and more radiant. They love you more than others do, but they need you less.¹⁵

Christians believe all of this is proof that they uniquely have a power through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that radically changes them into people who radically love other people. And their unique love gives Christians a reason to claim they know the only way to God and Heaven.

Jesus said: “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Accordingly, Christianity has a unique founder, beliefs, book, and love.

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite 1 Peter 3:18 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize John 14:6 in the translation above or another one.
- ▶ Meet with your small group this week to discuss these last two chapters.

¹ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), 27.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2001), 54-56.

³ Napoleon Bonaparte, “On the Divinity of Jesus Christ, at Saint Helena, 1820,” www.godtheoriginalintent.com/PDF%20Chapters/Napoleon20Bonaparte.pdf.

⁴ “Mahatma Gandhi, “Fasts for Communal Peace” online at http://www.mkgandhi.org/g_communal/chap25.htm.

⁵ According to the *World Religion Database*, in 2010 there were about 2.3 billion followers of Christianity. This is compared to about 1.5 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, and about .5 billion Buddhists. See online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_religious_groups.

⁶ K. S. Latourette, online at <http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/jesus-christ.htm>.

⁷ Apostle (meaning representative) is the word in the Bible to describe a man who was chosen by Jesus Christ to write the New Testament of the Bible. Much of the Old Testament was written by Prophets.

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- ⁸ For a list of the most printed books in the world see online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-printed_books.
- ⁹ For explanations of the historical accuracy of the Bible see online at <http://www.icr.org/biblical-record/>
- ¹⁰ Albert Einstein, quote taken from "What Life Means to Einstein," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929; <http://www.jewishvoice.org/who-is-yeshua/quotes-about-jesus/>
- ¹¹ For explanations of the how the Bible's description of creation is confirmed in modern science see online at <http://www.icr.org/bible-genesis/>
- ¹² For an examination of some claims that the Koran contains fulfilled prophecy see online at http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Shabir-Ally/q14_prophecy.htm
- ¹³ J. Barton Payne in his detailed study, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* documents these figures (Harper & Row, 1973). For a description of several of the most important and amazing biblical predictions that have come true see online at:
<http://s3.amazonaws.com/trainingtimothys/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/23190821/9.8-The-Divine-Record-of-Biblical-Prophetsx.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Kennedy and Newcombe, 3-4.
- ¹⁵ Lewis, 223.

Chapter 1.3

What Must I Believe about God to be Forgiven Forever?

John 3:16, 18

Week 2

► After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- 1) Why do people make too little of God's love? Does this describe you?
- 2) Why do people make too little of God's hatred for sin? Does this describe you?
- 3) How does the death of God the Son reconcile God the Father's justice and mercy?
- 4) What was especially meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a Professor of Philosophy and English Literature for almost 40 years, serving at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. At age 17 he wrote: "I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them" and He was "angry with God for not existing." But God continued to reveal Himself to Lewis. At the age of 31 he wrote:

You must picture me alone in that room at Oxford, night after night, feeling the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed. That night I was perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England. ¹

Not only did C. S. Lewis convert from atheism to Christianity, but he became perhaps the most respected Christian writer of the 20th century. Among his works was the popular *Chronicles of Narnia* series selling over 100 million copies and resulting in three major motion pictures. This very smart man would tell you that what Jesus claimed is true:

God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life. . . But whoever does not trust in God's Son is already condemned by God because they have not trusted in the name of God's one and only Son.

(John 3:16, 18 DEV ²)

John 3:16 is the most famous statement Jesus ever made. ³ In it He briefly explained the central message of Christianity. But His full statement also included a critical warning. In this chapter you will learn:

God the Father is holy and will punish all sin. But He is also loving and willing to forgive sin.

A) God the Father is holy and loving

Perhaps you are one of those people who doubts God's love. You are overwhelmed with how much you have broken God's laws and struggle to believe God could forgive you. John 3:16 is good news for you! Jesus said: *"God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life."*

If you doubt God can forgive you, the Apostle Paul, perhaps the greatest Christian to ever live, wrote the following to encourage you:

I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. . . . Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"- and I am the worst of them all.

But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Tim 1:13-16)

God's love is great enough to completely forgive *"even the worst sinners."* Therefore, God's love is certainly great enough to forgive you. ⁴ Do not make the mistake of thinking too little of God's love.

But perhaps you are like many people who think too little about God's holiness. To be holy means to hate sin and separate yourself from it. Sin is breaking God's laws. Because God the Father is holy He hates sin and separates Himself from sinners. The Bible says of God, *"You are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil"* (Hab 1:13). Therefore, people who think too little about God's holiness think too little about their sin and God's desire to punish it. In fact, they think too little about God.

One of the worst mistakes humans make is to presume that God the Father already loves them and therefore will forgive them. Maybe they know Christ's most famous statement above that God the Father loves the world. Unfortunately, this has given many a false sense of security in their relationship with Him. Especially those who think too little of their sin and God the Father's holiness. They think, "If God loves me then certainly He will forgive me."

Unfortunately many people do not read what Jesus said just two verses after saying God loves the world in John 3:16. In verse 18 He said: *"But whoever does not trust in God's Son is already condemned by God because they have not trusted in the name of God's one and only Son."* Also a few verses later He said: *"Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment"* (John

3:36). Do not make the mistake of thinking too little of God's holiness and hatred for your sin.

How can both John 3:16 and John 3:18 be true? If God the Father loved the world enough to send His Son to die, why does "*God's angry judgment*" currently remain toward some people? Because as the primary point of this chapter states: God the Father is holy and will punish all sin. But He is also loving and willing to forgive sin. And believing both of these things about God the Father is necessary to be forgiven by Him.

Jesus Christ said, "*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life. . . But whoever does not trust in God's Son is already condemned by God because they have not trusted in the name of God's one and only Son*" (John 3:16, 18).

B) God the Father will punish all sin

What do you think is the biggest problem in your life? What do you need to fear the most? Losing your job? Losing a friendship? Getting sick? Dying? If you do not trust and follow Jesus, then your greatest problem is none of these. Your biggest problem is God. The thing you need to fear the most is being punished by God. Jesus said:

Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt 10:28)

If you do not have a right relationship with God you should "*be afraid of*" Him because He will "*destroy both [your] soul and body in hell.*" Hell is the place of eternal punishment for those who do not trust and follow Jesus Christ. The Bible says of Jesus Christ:

He will come with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power. (2 Thess 1:7-9)

"*The Good News of our Lord Jesus*" is that you can be completely forgiven forever through Jesus Christ. But if you "*refuse to obey the Good News,*" you "*will be punished with eternal destruction.*"

Because Hell is a real place, Jesus talked about it more often than Heaven including:

That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 13:49-50)

The Bible talks a lot about God being angry with people who break His laws. The Psalms say of God, “*You hate all who do evil*” and “*He hates those who love violence*” (Psalms 5:5; 11:5). The Prophet Isaiah wrote: “*The LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice*” (Isa 5:16 DEV).

The Father’s “*justice*” will result in the punishment of people who break His laws. What kind of God would just let people disobey Him without penalty? That would be a weak god. The real God is not weak.

God’s anger against sinners will be very clear at the end of the world:

See, the day of the LORD is coming- the terrible day of his fury and fierce anger. The land will be made desolate, and all the sinners destroyed with it. . . . "I, the LORD, will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their sin. I will crush the arrogance of the proud and humble the pride of the mighty . . . The earth will move from its place when the LORD Almighty displays his wrath in the day of his fierce anger." (Isa 13:9, 11, 13 DEV)

But God the Father’s anger will not only be revealed and experienced at the end of a person’s life. He is angry with sinners now. As you have already read: “*Anyone who doesn’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God’s angry judgment [now]*” (John 3:18, 36).

God the Father will punish sinners when they die, but He is also punishing them now. This is why so many people experience bad, hurtful things in their lives and feel so empty and without hope. What would we expect when they do not have a relationship with their Creator and He is angry with them because they constantly break His laws? Unfortunately, most people belittle the glory, holiness, and justice of God the Father and how much He hates disobedience. But He is God after all!

Jesus said, “*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life. . . . But whoever does not trust in God’s Son is already condemned by God because they have not trusted in the name of God’s one and only Son*” (John 3:16, 18). God the Father is holy and will punish all sin. But He is also loving and willing to forgive sin.

C) God the Father is willing to forgive sin

God the Father is holy. He hates your sin and will punish all of it. But thankfully He is also willing to provide a way to forgive your sin. That is why Jesus said, “*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life*” (John 3:16) and be forgiven forever.

This is important for those who think too much of their sin and too little of the mercy of the Father. God the Father demonstrated His desire

to rescue people from the punishment of their sin when “*He gave up his one and only Son*” to die for those sins.

No matter how great your sin, God the Father’s plan for your forgiveness will work if you will submit to it. God is the only One with the authority to eternally punish or forgive sin. And He has promised that Christ’s death will pay the full penalty of your sin if you will trust and obey His Son.

Unfortunately, the good news about forgiveness forever through Jesus Christ (the Gospel) will mean little to you if you deny you deserve God’s punishment and need His forgiveness. Again, most people presume that God the Father loves everyone the same way and that all are His children. But this is not so. It is true, as Jesus said of God the Father: “*He gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike*” (Matt 5:45). The Father is kind and good to all humans just by giving them life and providing for them.

But the Father does not accept or forgive everyone. Only His children. And contrary to what many believe, most humans are not God’s children. The Bible says of Jesus Christ:

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. . . . But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:10, 12)

You do not possess the acceptance, protection, and privileges of being a son or daughter of God the Father just by being born into this world. Only those who have “*believed . . . and accepted*” Jesus Christ as their only Savior and King are given “*the right to become children of God.*” God is the Creator of all people but not the Father of all people. Many people do not even want God to be their father. They reject God’s Son instead of trust and accept Him. Therefore God rejects them.

The Father is going to punish every single one of your sins. He can do this by the punishment He gave His Son when He died hanging on a cross. Or He will punish your sins by sending you into the fire of Hell. But if you are one of those who will accept Christ’s sacrifice for your sins, then God can be both just and loving toward you. Just, because your sins were punished. Loving, because His Son suffered the punishment for you. The death of God the Son demonstrates that God the Father is holy and will punish all sin. But He is also loving and willing to forgive sin.

God the Father is holding out a peace offering to you in His Son. If you accept it, the Father will accept you. If you reject Christ, the Father will reject you. As Jesus Christ said: “*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life. . . . But whoever does not trust in God’s Son is already condemned by God because they have not trusted in the name of God’s one and only Son*” (John 3:16, 18). God

the Father is holy and will punish all sin. But He is also loving and willing to forgive sin.

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite John 14:6 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize John 3:16, 18 in the translation above or another.
- ▶ Read the next chapter to prepare for your discussion group this week.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harvest, 1966), 115, 228-229.

² John 3:16 (DEV)- “*God the Father*” reflects which Person of the Trinity is being referred to.

“*Trusts*” translates the Greek word *pisteuōn* meaning: “to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust, believe” (*BDAG*). In modern English, “trust” conveys the meaning here better than believe. Many people believe in Jesus Christ but it does not change their life. The promise in John 3:16 is for those who actually trust Him.

“*Destroyed*” translates the Greek word *apolētai* meaning: “to cause or experience destruction” (*BDAG*).

“*Condemned*” translates the Greek word *krinetai* meaning: “to pass an unfavorable judgment upon, find fault with, condemn” (*BDAG*). Jesus’ meaning is more than God just evaluating people, but rather He punishes them. See NIV, ESV, NET.

³ Some English translations stop quoting Jesus at John 3:15, suggesting He did not personally speak verses 16-21 (cf. NIV, NET). But it is clear that Jesus is still dialoguing with Nicodemus (cf. vs. 3:1-15) and even answering a question Nicodemus asked in v. 9. There is no break in the dialogue to suggest otherwise. Therefore, the NLT, NASB, ESV, KJV, NCV are correct to extend the quotation through v. 21.

⁴ Some will object that Jesus spoke of an “unforgiveable sin” (Matt 12:32). But this described people whose hearts were so hard that when they saw Jesus heal a man they claimed He did it with the Devil’s power. For more on this see the section on Your Father’s Acceptance in *Christian Essentials* study #3, *FAITH*.

Chapter 1.4

What Must I Believe About Myself to be Forgiven Forever?

Romans 3:20, 3:23

Week 2

► After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- 1) If you were to die today, and God were to ask you: “Why should I let you into My Heaven?” What would you say?
- 2) What are some ways you have sinned and broken God’s laws?
- 3) Why will your good deeds not be able to pay for your bad deeds?
- 4) What was especially meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

Who holds the most ancient world record in the famous *Guinness Book of World Records*? Simeon of the Pillar. Who lived from about the year 380 to 450. He has a world record because for 37 years, without interruption, he lived on top of a pillar in the middle of a desert.

Simeon’s home was a column that was eventually 50 feet high and had a platform on top of only about 3 feet by 3 feet. A ladder to the top was built so young boys from the nearby village could provide Simeon food and water. For 37 years he constantly lived, slept, prayed, and evidently went to the bathroom from a 3 by 3 foot pillar 50 feet off the ground. He never came down until at the age of 80 they discovered he had died up there.

What drove Simeon to live so sacrificially? He believed such a great sacrifice would earn him the forgiveness of God. You would think it would be pretty hard to even sin if you were living on top of a pillar in the middle of the desert. But Simeon was trying to earn the favor of God. He told his mother through a messenger: “If we are worthy we will see one another in the life to come.”¹ Simeon believed you have to do enough good, spiritual, and sacrificial things to earn your forever forgiveness from God and go to Heaven. And even after all of his sacrifice, Simeon still was not sure he was worthy of such forgiveness.

The truth is no one will ever be worth of being forgiven by God forever. In this chapter you will learn why all of Simeon’s sacrifices, and all of the other things that people do to earn God’s favor are rejected by God.

Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard (Romans 3:23).

No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are (Romans 3:20).

How would you answer the following vital question:

If you were to die today, and God were to ask you: "Why should I let you into My Heaven?" What would you say?

Most people respond they have not done anything bad enough to be rejected by God. Or they have done enough good things to pay for the bad things in their life. The Bible says all of these beliefs are wrong. And they are wrong about the most important question they need to answer: Why would God accept me and forgive me?

You read in the last chapter there is a great penalty for sin. Therefore, the important question is how do you obtain God's forgiveness for your sin. Most people answer that question in the wrong way, and end up paying for it for eternity. The main point of this chapter is:

Your sins deserve God's punishment and your good deeds cannot pay the penalty.

A) God condemns you because you break His laws

Why is God angry with people and planning to punish them for eternity? Because they break His laws which the Bible calls sin. The Bible says: "*If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar*" (1 John 1:10). Sin is breaking the laws of God. Christians believe some of these laws are communicated in the Ten Commandments of which God said:

I am the LORD your God . . . You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind . . . You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. . . .

You must not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name. . . . Honor your father and mother. . . . You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely against your neighbor. You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must not covet your neighbor's wife . . . or anything else that belongs to your neighbor. (Exod 20:2-5, 7, 12-17)

Have you ever loved anyone or anything more than God? Have you ever used God's or Jesus' name as a swear word? Have you ever dishonored your parents, stolen something, lied about something, or wanted something that belonged to someone else? Then you have broken a commandment of God and sinned against Him.

However, sin is not just your outward actions, but also your inward thoughts and attitudes. Jesus said:

You have heard that our ancestors were told, "You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment." But I

say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! . . .

You have heard the commandment that says, “You must not commit adultery.” But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt 5:21-23, 27-28)

God knows your life and how much you sin against Him in your actions. God also knows your mind and how much you sin against Him in your thoughts. And if you are honest, you know how much you break God’s laws too. As the Bible says: *“Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard”* (Rom 3:23). **Your sins deserve God’s punishment and your good deeds cannot pay the penalty.**

B) Your good deeds do not pay for your bad deeds

It was stated above that not even the great sacrifices of Simeon of the Pillar could earn him forever forgiveness from God. The Apostle Paul described his experience and belief about this in his own life when he wrote:

I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him.

I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. (Phil 3:5-9)

Accordingly, the Apostle Paul wrote elsewhere in the Bible: *“No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are”* (Rom 3:20).

Many think God gave you His laws such as the Ten Commandments so you will know how to be accepted by God. They think they can pay for the bad things they do, by doing good things. But the purpose of God’s commandments are not to show you how to pay for your sins. Instead, God’s *“law simply shows us how sinful we are”* (Rom 3:20).

One of the biggest mistakes that humans make is believing their good deeds earn them a place in Heaven. They compare themselves with “bad” people and conclude that surely God will accept them. There are several problems with this idea. First of all, Jesus said relatively very few people are going to go to Heaven. Jesus taught:

You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to [eternal] life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it. (Matt 7:13-14)

We must ask a very important question here. Why did Jesus say “*only a few*” people will “*find*” the “*gateway to [eternal] life*”? Especially if the “*road*” to eternal life is good deeds? If being good is how you get to Heaven, wouldn't there be many people going instead of “*few*”? The answer is this. The reason that “*only a few*” people will “*find*” the “*gateway to [eternal] life*” is because most people will try to find the road to eternal life by being good. Most people think being good is the road and gate to Heaven, but it is not. And that is why “*the many*” are on “*the highway to hell.*” As the Bible text for this chapter tells you: “*No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands*” (Rom 3:20) and being a good person.

One of the reasons that your good deeds cannot pay for your bad deeds is that the Bible says: “*The wages of sin is death*” (Rom 6:23). A wage is something you earn. According to God, you earn the death penalty when you sin. No amount of good deeds will pay the death penalty. Only dying pays the penalty for your disobeying God.

Sin has infected even the good things you try to do. Imagine that you were infected with leprosy. But you wanted to make some food as a good deed for your friend. Would your friend accept the food? No, because they would not want to be contaminated. This is how it is with God. He is perfectly pure and cannot have any contact with any sin, or people who are infected with sin.

The Prophet Isaiah said: “*We are constant sinners; how can people like us be saved? We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags*” (Isa 64:5-6). God will not accept your “*righteous deeds*” because you are “*infected and impure with sin.*” More often than you might think, even the good things you do are motivated by selfish desires. The Bible says, “*No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are*” (Rom 3:20). Your sins deserve God's punishment and your good deeds cannot pay the penalty.

C) Why Jesus died on a cross

We began this chapter with an important question: Why do you think you will be accepted by God? Many answer they have not done something bad enough to be rejected by God. Many others think their good deeds, such as going to church and giving money, will earn God's acceptance. But if that was true, WHY DID THE FATHER HAVE TO SEND HIS SON TO DIE ON A CROSS FOR YOUR SINS?

Think about it. Does your belief about how to be accepted by God even need the death of God's Son for you? Do you even believe you needed Christ to die for you? If you believe your good deeds will pay your way to Heaven, you do not need Christ to die for you. The Bible says, *"If keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die"* (Gal 2:21). But Christ needed to die for your sins because your good deeds do not pay for your bad deeds.

God will only forgive those who admit their good deeds will not pay for their bad deeds. Most people refuse to admit this and try to justify themselves before God. They refuse to believe that *"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom 6:23). Why did Jesus die? Because: *"The wages of sin is death."* Only death pays for your sins. Either Christ's death or your death. But not your good deeds. The Bible says to Christians:

God rescued you from His wrath because of His undeserved kindness. This happened through faith given to you, and not from yourselves. Your rescue from God's wrath is a gift from God and not a result of something you did so that no one can boast it depended on them. (Eph 2:8-9 DEV ²).

What are you "rescued" from? God's eternal punishment for breaking His laws. Why are you forgiven? *"Because of His undeserved kindness."* How are you forgiven? *"Through faith given to you"* to trust Christ to pay for your sin by dying on the cross. Why can *"no one . . . boast"* about being forgiven by God? Because even your saving *"faith,"* and every other requirement for forgiveness is *"not from yourselves"* but *"a gift from God and not a result of something you did."* It is all God's work to rescue you from the penalty of your sin. ³

This is another unique belief of Christianity. Like many religions, Christianity teaches that *"Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"* (Rom 3:23). But every other religion in the world claims you can pay for your bad deeds by doing good deeds. Real Christianity alone proclaims: *"No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands"* (Rom 3:20). Therefore, your sins deserve God's punishment and your good deeds cannot pay the penalty.

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite John 3:16, 18 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize Romans 3:20 and 3:23 from the translation above or another.
- ▶ Read the next chapter to prepare for your discussion this week.

¹ For more on Simeon of the Pillar see online at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_Stylites

² (Eph 2:8-9 DEV)- “*Rescued you from His wrath*” translates the Greek word *sesōsmenoi*, meaning “To rescue and preserve from danger or destruction” (BDAG). It is often translated as merely “saved,” but the Greek has the more complete and clear meaning of “being saved from danger.”

“*Underserved kindness*” translates the Greek word *chariti*, meaning “a beneficent disposition toward someone, grace, favor” (BDAG #2). Webster’s defines “grace” as “unmerited kindness.” Accordingly, Greek scholar William Mounce defines the Greek *charis* as “the acceptance of and goodness toward those who cannot earn or do not deserve such favor” (*Complete Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Zondervan, 2006], 304).

³ Respected Bible teacher John MacArthur comments on Ephesians 2:8-9:

Our response in salvation is faith, but even that is not of ourselves [but is] the gift of God. [Saving] Faith is nothing that we do in our own power or by our own resources. Otherwise salvation would be in part by our own works, and we would have some ground to boast in ourselves. Paul intends to emphasize that even faith is not from us apart from God’s giving it. (MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Nelson, 1986])

For further discussion on Ephesians 2:8-9 see Pastor Kurt’s commentary online at:

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/trainingtimothys/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/23190754/18.1-Water-Baptism.pdf>

Chapter 1.5

What Must I Believe About Jesus Christ to be Forgiven Forever?

Romans 3:22

Week 2

We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. (Romans 3:22)

You read in the previous chapter: “*No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands*” (Rom 3:20). This means you cannot earn the Father’s forgiveness with good deeds. How then do you obtain God’s forgiveness? The main point of this chapter is:

You are forgiven forever if you trust that Christ’s death paid the penalty for your sins.

This is the Gospel, the good news about forgiveness forever through Jesus Christ!

A) Admit you need a Savior

Unfortunately, if you refuse to believe the bad news about the punishment your sins have earned, the good news about God’s forgiveness will mean nothing to you. The bad news is that you have disobeyed God and earned the penalty of His punishment. But if you refuse to believe this, you will not believe you need to be forgiven by God.

Likewise, if you believe you can earn God’s acceptance by doing good deeds, you will not care that God had His Son die to pay for your sin.

Imagine that you had cancer and there was a cure for it. If you refused to believe or admit you were deathly sick you would not value or pursue the cure because you do not understand or admit your need. Just the same, if you do not believe you need to be rescued from the wrath and punishment of God because of your disobedience to His laws, then you will not value the cure for sin that God offers through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, if your conscience and the Holy Spirit are convincing you that you are a sinner deserving God’s judgment, then the forgiveness of God is good news! In fact, the very best news you will ever hear. The Bible says, “*We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are*” (Rom 3:22). You are forgiven forever if you trust that Christ’s death paid the penalty for your sins.

B) Trust that Jesus Christ paid for your sins

The Bible says:

God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. (Rom 3:24-25)

What is God's forgiveness based on? Jesus Christ has done everything for you. He lived a pure life for you. He paid the death penalty for you when He died on the cross. The Bible says, "God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Cor 5:21). Also, "Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God" (1 Pet 3:18). God has allowed Jesus to pay the death penalty for your sin. God has offered to transfer Christ's holiness to you!

In the previous chapter you learned that no human can be good enough to be forgiven by the Father. But God the Son was good enough. And as God in a human body, He alone could be good enough. This is why Jesus said this about getting to Heaven: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Imagine that you are in court before a judge to pay a fine for breaking a law. But you do not have enough money and will therefore be put in jail. The judge could justly require you to pay the penalty for your crime. But instead he stands up and removes his robe, comes around to your side of the judge's bench, and gives you money to pay the fine. Then he returns to his seat, accepts the payment he gave you, and sets you free. This is what God has done through Christ for those who will receive His gift.

Some people struggle with receiving the Father's forgiveness because they feel unworthy. No one has ever died for them like Jesus did, or forgiven them like the Father desires to. They are so aware of their sins they doubt the Father could completely forgive them. But remember, even the Apostle Paul said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners- and I am the worst of them all" (1 Tim 1:15).

The blood that God the Son shed for sin is precious and powerful enough to pay for any amount of sin. God's love is big enough to cover and forgive your sins. The Bible says to Christians: "He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:13-14). When you become a Christian, God erases any record of your sins because His Son already suffered for them.

The Bible says, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are" (Rom 3:22). You are forgiven forever if you trust that Christ's death paid the penalty for your sins.

C) Trust in Jesus Christ as your only Savior and King

How do you obtain this wonderful gift of forgiveness from God? As discussed in chapter 1.2, the most famous statement that Jesus Christ ever made was: “*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life*” (John 3:16 DEV). What does it mean to believe? It means to trust. You really do not believe something or someone unless you trust. You receive the Father’s gift of forgiveness by trusting in the name of Jesus Christ.

What does the name Jesus Christ mean? Jesus (Hebrew: *Joshua*) means Savior. Christ (Hebrew: *Messiah*, “anointed one”) means King. Trusting in Jesus as your Savior means you depend on Him to rescue you from the penalty for your sins. Trusting in Christ as your King means you gladly agree to follow Him and obey His commands. The Lord Jesus Christ cannot be divided. You cannot trust in Him as only your Savior and reject Him as your King. In fact, as discussed in the next chapter, obeying Christ as your King is the only sure proof that you have truly trusted in Him as your Savior.

Trusting in Christ as your Savior and King includes believing in His resurrection. The Bible says: “*He was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (Rom 1:4). Therefore, the Bible also says: “*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 [from being punished for your sin]*” (Rom 10:9). When God raised Christ from the dead it was proof that He is the only one that can rescue you from the penalty of sin which is death. It was also proof that God has crowned “*the Son of God*” to be your only rightful Lord.

The Bible calls Jesus “Savior” only about ten times, but calls Him “Lord” about 700 times! If you want the Father’s forgiveness you must trust that Jesus saves you from the penalty of your sin *and* that Christ is the King you will obey. The Bible says, “*We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are*” (Rom 3:22). You are forgiven forever if you trust that Christ’s death paid the penalty for your sins.

D) How can you trust in Jesus as your Savior?

You can understand all the truth necessary to be a Christian and still not be a Christian. Mere knowledge of the Good News about Jesus Christ will not get you to Heaven. What is necessary is to trust and even love this Good News. The Bible speaks of “*those on their way to destruction, because they refuse to love and accept the truth that would save them*” (2 Thess 2:10).

How do you go from merely knowing the Good News about Jesus, to dearly loving and personally trusting in that Good News? GOD HAS TO HELP YOU.

Any human can logically understand what the Bible says about Jesus Christ. But it requires a MIRACLE from God to enable you to personally trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and love Him as your King. This is the kind of believing that saves you from God's punishment for your sins. The Bible says that humans are not naturally born with the ability to trust and love Christ in this way.

Therefore, it is important to understand that becoming a Christian is not merely making a decision. It is not choosing to change religions or join a group. It is not choosing to change certain bad habits. Likewise, being born into a Christian family does not make you a Christian either. Why? The Bible explains:

The merely natural person without God's Spirit does not value and trust the truths that come from God's Spirit [like the truth about Jesus]. This is because these truths sound foolish to them and they cannot grasp their importance because they can only be properly evaluated with God's Spirit" (1 Cor 2:14 DEV ¹).

The Holy Spirit of God must give you the ability to correctly evaluate and trust in who Jesus Christ really is. Why is this? Because there is another spirit at work in the world. The Bible says:

Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God" (2 Cor 4:4).

People are born into this world being spiritually blind about "*the glory of Christ*" and who He really is. This is why the Bible says this about Christians: "*God . . . has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.* (2 Cor 4:6). The Holy Spirit must fix your spiritual "eyes" so you can see and trust in who Jesus Christ really is.

The early Christian historian Luke describes an example of the Holy Spirit doing this very thing in the Acts of the Apostles:

On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God.

As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying [about Jesus]. She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am

a true believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my home.”
(Acts 16:13-15)

Notice some things about Lydia. First, she “*worshiped God*” and believed in God, but did not trust in Jesus Christ. Many people are like this. But it is not enough to believe in God to be forgiven by God. You must trust in His Son that He sent to die for your sins.

Secondly, notice that “*the Lord opened her heart*” so “*she accepted what Paul was saying*” about Jesus. That must happen for anyone to accept and trust that Jesus is their Savior and King.

Finally, notice the result of Lydia’s trusting in Christ. She obeyed Jesus’ command to be “*baptized*” (cf. Matthew 28:19) and was kind to the Christians. As we will explain more in the next chapter, when a person truly trusts in Christ as their Savior and King, it radically and permanently changes their attitudes, desires, and lifestyle.

Like Lydia, God needs to work in a person’s heart before they can truly trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and King. Jesus talked about this when He said:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me. . . The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But some of you do not believe me. . . That is why I said that people cannot come to me unless the Father has enabled them. (John 6:63-65) ²

How do you know if God’s Spirit is drawing and pulling you toward Jesus? Do you sense an emptiness inside of you that only He can satisfy? Are you feeling guilty about your sins against God and want to be forgiven? Are you afraid of being punished in Hell? Does the Gospel, or Good News about Jesus Christ seem true to you? Can you see and trust Him as your Savior and King?

Then God has drawn you to His Son and enabled you to trust Him. Express your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and King right now. The Bible says: “*If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Rom 10:9). If you sincerely believe in your heart that Christ is your Savior, then God wants you to verbally profess that He is your Lord. You can pray that to Him right now. He is listening.

The Bible says, “*We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are*” (Rom 3:22). You are forgiven forever if you trust that Christ’s death paid the penalty for your sins.

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite Romans 3:20 and 3:23 from memory.

- ▶ Memorize Romans 3:22 from the translation above or another.
- ▶ If you are not a Christian, complete Project 1.A on the next page.
- ▶ If you are a Christian, complete Project 1.B on the following pages.
- ▶ Meet with your group this week to discuss chapters 1.3-1.5 of this study. Especially let the group know if you have expressed your trust in Christ to God.

¹ (1 Cor 2:14 DEV)- “*Merely natural person without God’s Spirit*” translates the Greek word *psychikos* referring to “the natural world in contrast to the spiritual realm” (BDAG).

“*Value and trust*” translates the Greek word *dechetai* meaning “to indicate approval or conviction by accepting” (BDAG). Paul’s meaning goes beyond the inability to logically understand, but appreciation is the idea.

Several NT scholars point this out. C. K. Barrett writes, “To the natural man these truths seem foolish because they invert the values by which he lives” (Hendrickson, 2000, p. 77). Leon Morris says, “The verb (*dechomai*) has an air of welcome about it; it is the usual word for the reception of a guest” (Tyndale, 1999, p. 59). Gordon Fee summarizes: “The implication is not that *psychikos* persons are simply unable to understand the things of the Spirit, but that, because of their being ‘merely’ human’ (i.e., without the help of the Spirit), they ‘reject’ the things of the Spirit” (Eerdmans, 1987, p. 116).

“*The truths*” reflects the context of the previous verses.

“*Grasp their importance*” translates the Greek word which can mean “to grasp the significance of something” (BDAG #3).

“*Properly evaluated*” translates the Greek word *anakrinetai* which can mean “to examine with the purpose of finding error; judge” (BDAG #3). Morris notes it can include the idea of “estimating” (59). See its use in the very next verse (15) where it is clearly used with the idea of evaluation.

² For more study on the need for God’s Spirit to make a person able to trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior see *Biblical Faith*, chapters 6.2-6.5; online at: <https://trainingtimothys.org/books/book-6-biblical-believing/>.

Project 1.A

Ask God to Open Your Heart to Jesus Christ**Week 2**

In the previous chapter you read about Lydia. She “*worshipped God*” but did not know the true God through Jesus Christ. Then “*the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying*” (Acts 16:14) about forgiveness forever through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you do not have a personal relationship with Christ, you are encouraged to pray that God would do for you what He did for Lydia. That He would open your heart and remove your spiritual blindness so you can realize who Jesus Christ really is. Then you will have a real and life changing faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

If you believe God is opening your heart, and you want Jesus to be your Savior and King, then profess the following beliefs to God. They are a summary of the 6 things you must believe about God the Father, yourself, and God the Son to be forgiven forever. You can simply pray to God and tell Him you believe the following:

- ❶ My sins deserve God’s punishment.
 - ❷ My good deeds cannot pay the penalty for my sin.
 - ❸ God will punish sin because He is holy.
 - ❹ God is willing to forgive sin because He is loving.
 - ❺ Jesus Christ is my only Savior who paid for my sin by dying for them and being raised from the dead.
 - ❻ Jesus Christ is my King and I want to obey His commandments.
- If you have prayed these things and asked Christ to be your Savior and King, please tell your small group when you meet this week or a Christian friend.

Project 1.B

Share the Good News about Jesus with a Non-Christian Friend

He gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors. God is making his appeal through us
(2 Cor 5:19-20).

When you become a Christian, you also become one of “*Christ's ambassadors*.” Jesus wants you to be His messenger to those who need Him. Think of the person who helped you understand “*this wonderful message of reconciliation*” with the Father. God used a Christian who cared enough to tell you the Good News about Jesus. “*God is making His appeal through us*” for people to believe in Christ.

All real Christians will desire the honor of being one of “*Christ's ambassadors*” and telling others how to be forgiven by the Father. Here are some practical steps for communicating the Gospel to a non-Christian person.

Pray for them

Jesus said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me*” (John 6:44). Because non-Christians are spiritually “*dead*” (Eph 2:1; cf. 1 Cor 2:14), God’s Spirit must work in their life to, “*convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment*” (John 16:8). It is not your job to make people feel guilty about their sin. This is God’s responsibility. And until He does His convicting work in a person’s life, the Good News about God’s grace will not mean much to them. God has to prepare people for the Good News. Therefore, you need to pray for those you hope to share the Gospel with. The great evangelist the Apostle Paul wrote: “*Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ*” (Col 4:3 NIV). You should do the same.

Love them

Jesus said, “*Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*” (Matt 5:16). The Father wants to use your kindness toward people to draw them to Him. As an ambassador for Christ, it is your privilege to demonstrate the love and holiness of Christ. Find ways to be kind to the people you want to speak to about Jesus. As the saying goes: People do not care what you know until they know you care.

Test them

How can you know if God is drawing someone to Him and convicting them of their sin? Try to start a conversation with them about spiritual things and see how they respond. You can say something like:

“I have been studying the Christian Bible with a friend and have been amazed at what it says about how God forgives us. Would you be interested in hearing more sometime?”

A person’s response to such conversation starters will help you know if God is convicting them of their sin and drawing them to Him.

Invite them

Inviting a friend, family member, or coworker to church or a Christian event can accomplish two things. Their response is another test of their spiritual temperature. Also, meeting other Christians can be a powerful tool that God uses to draw the person to Jesus. Remember, Jesus said, “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples*” (John 13:35). It is not only important that non-Christians experience your love for them. It is also important that they see the love between your Christian family and friends. Invite them to opportunities to experience this.

Team up

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to preach the Gospel, He “*began sending them out two by two*” (Mark 6:7). Likewise, when “*The Lord . . . chose seventy-two other disciples [He] sent them ahead in pairs*” (Luke 10:1). Practice Jesus’ strategy as much as possible. Involve a Christian friend when you befriend, serve, or share the Gospel with a non-Christian.

Share your story

Jesus healed a man possessed by demons and the man became a follower of Christ. Jesus gave him this instruction: “*Go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been*” (Mark 5:19). Jesus wants you to do the same.

You should prepare and even practice being able to share your story in just 1-2 minutes. To develop your testimony about becoming a Christian, spend some time writing a few notes to the following questions. They will help you organize and communicate your testimony:

- 1) What was your life like before you became a Christian?
- 2) How did you become a Christian?
- 3) How has Jesus Christ changed your life?

Share Christ's Story

The Bible says: “*I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes*” (Rom 1:16). The Father wants to use your prayers, kindness, character, and even story to give you an opportunity to explain the “*Good News about Christ.*” If God’s Spirit is working in their life, this message will be “*the power of God at work*” that convinces them to accept Jesus as their Savior and King.

To share the bad news about sin and the Good News about Jesus you can simply go through the first five chapters of this *FORGIVENESS* study with someone. In addition, you can use the “Cross Diagram” on the next page. It is a graphic summary of the 6 beliefs necessary to have forever forgiveness from God.

Project 1.B

You are encouraged to complete the following assignment. Think of a non-Christian friend or family member who may be willing to hear about your relationship with Christ. It is suggested that you specifically tell them the following:

“I am going through a class about Jesus. One of my assignments is to explain more about Jesus to someone who would like to know more about Him. Would you be willing to help me with this?”

Most friends will be glad to help you. But you will be helping them to have the most important thing they could ever have: forever forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ! ¹

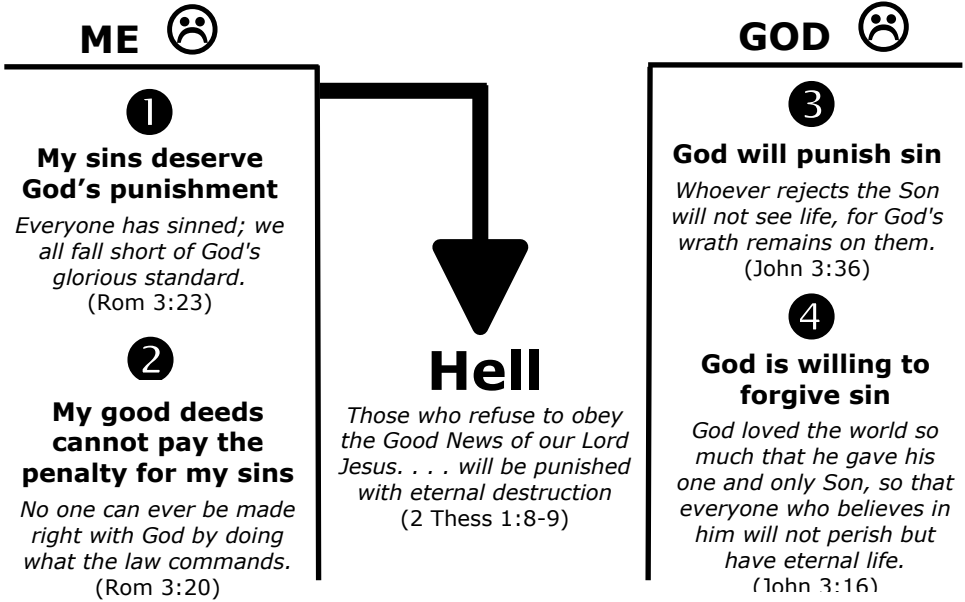
- ▶ When you complete this project, tell your small group what happened and pray for the person you talked to.

¹ For more instruction on effectively communicating the Gospel see the section “Reaching Others” in *Christian Essentials* study #6: *FRUITFULNESS*.

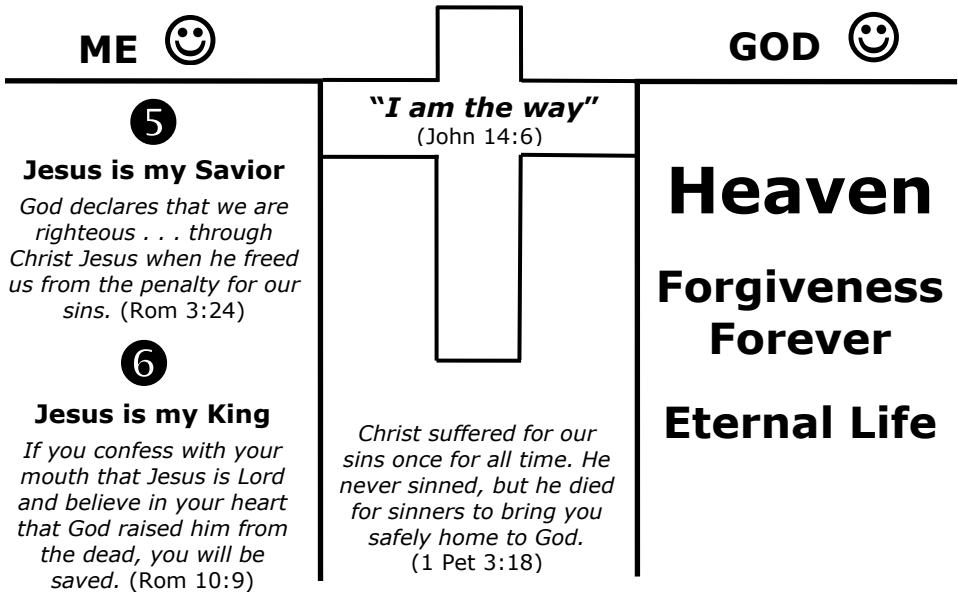
“Cross Diagram”

6 Essential Beliefs to be Forgiven Forever

Eternal destiny for those WITHOUT Christ



Eternal destiny for those WITH Christ



Chapter 1.6

Being Certain about the Most Important Thing in Your Life

1 John 5:13

Week 3

► After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- 1) It is claimed in this chapter that you can be certain you have eternal life and are forgiven by God forever? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 2) Why does God want you to be certain you have eternal forgiveness?
- 3) Why does God want you to examine your life?
- 4) What was most meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

James struggled a lot with knowing if he was truly a Christian. In fact, he had prayed many times for God to save and forgive him, but was not sure if his prayers worked. He believed all the things you are supposed to believe, but he still had doubts. John could not say he was 100% certain that he was going to Heaven. His doubts produced fear in his relationship with God. And robbed him of the peace and joy that comes from knowing for certain your sins are completely forgiven forever. John needed to understand what the Bible says about the assurance of our salvation. The Apostle John said:

I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

God wants His children to be certain they are forgiven forever and have eternal life.

A) God wants His children to be certain about the most important thing

What is the most important question you need to answer in this life? It is this: Where will you go after you die? Not being certain of where you will spend eternity will gnaw on your mind your whole life. Especially when you are about to die. Then you will know this is the most important question of your life. God wants you to settle the question of where you will spend eternity once and for all.

The above Bible verse makes it clear God wants you to “*know you have eternal life.*” You learned in the previous chapters that you receive “*eternal life*” when you “*believe in the name of the Son of God*” (1 John 5:13). If you have “*eternal life*” from God then you have eternal forgiveness as well. God wants His children to be certain they are forgiven forever and have eternal life.

We live in an age of uncertainty. It is claimed we are not supposed to be absolutely certain about anything, especially our relationship with God. Some think it is impossible or arrogant to be certain you have eternal life and forgiveness forever. In the face of such skepticism, the Apostle John wrote: “*I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:13).

Some believe you can lose your relationship with God, therefore making it impossible to be certain you have eternal life and forgiveness forever. This is a topic that will be discussed more thoroughly elsewhere in the *Christian Essentials*.¹ But notice what the Apostle John is saying you can be certain of now: “*eternal life*.” Eternal life is eternal. It never stops. When you become a Christian you receive eternal life. Remember again Jesus’ famous promise: “*God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life*” (John 3:16 DEV).

God’s word clearly teaches that it is possible to be certain “*you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:13) now. Therefore, you can also be certain you have eternal and complete forgiveness from God. Once you are a child of God and have received eternal life and forgiveness forever, you will always be a child of God. Your Father will never reject you. And as we will see in the following chapters, the Bible tells you how to be certain of these things which are the most important thing in your life.

Accordingly, NT scholar John Stott remarks on the Apostle John’s purpose for his letter:

Many Christians are filled with doubt and confusion about their relationship with God. To read the letters of John is to enter another world of assurance, truth, confidence, and boldness. The primary theme of John’s letters is Christian certainty. John believed that this assurance of salvation is right and healthy in all Christian people. . . This is greatly needed but sadly missing in the Church today.²

There are many things in your life that you cannot be certain about. But God wants His children to be certain they are forgiven forever and have eternal life. This is why the Apostle John wrote: “*I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:13).

B) Why God wants you to be certain about being forgiven forever

Why wouldn’t God want you to know your relationship with Him is eternally secure? Wouldn’t you as a father or mother want your child to know that you will love them no matter what? God wants you to be secure in His love for you. Otherwise you will continue to live in an unhealthy fear of Him, living as if you need to keep earning His forgiveness. That is not the relationship God wants to have with you.

The Apostle John also wrote: *“Perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love”* (1 John 4:18). God does not want His children to be afraid of anything, including “*punishment*,”³ rejection, or even death (cf. Matt 10:28). Like any good Father, God wants you to be motivated to love and serve Him out of gratitude for your forgiveness instead of fear or guilt.

John wrote at the beginning of his letter another reason he wanted Christians to be sure about God’s complete and forever forgiveness: *“We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy”* (1 John 1:4).⁴ Having doubts about God’s forgiveness and your ultimate eternal destiny will certainly rob your joy. But knowing for certain that you are forgiven completely and forever and your eternal destiny is secure will give you tremendous spiritual strength and encouragement throughout your life.

Not being sure about your forever forgiveness and eternal security will weaken your Christian life in many ways. For example, research has confirmed that many Christians who are deceived by cults and false teachers lack confidence in God’s forgiveness.

The Bible says to the real Christian: *“Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom 8:39). *“Nothing in all creation”* includes your sins, weaknesses, and times of spiritual failure. A real Christian can trust that there is nothing they can do to separate themselves from God. This is the essential foundation of a healthy and growing Christian life.

In fact, God’s promises of love are the first reason the Christian can be certain of their forgiveness. Jesus promised: *“God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life”* (John 3:16; cf. Rom 10:8-9; 1 John 5:1). The foundation of your certainty in God’s forever forgiveness is that *“it is impossible for God to lie”* (Heb 6:18). He keeps His promises.

God has promised that *“whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). And God wants His children to be certain they are forgiven forever and have eternal life. Which is why the Apostle John said: *“I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life”* (1 John 5:13).

C) God wants you to examine yourself to be certain you are forgiven forever

The Apostle John said he wrote his letter, *“so that you may know you have eternal life”* (1 John 5:13). This is why throughout his letter, he also gave clear and convincing tests of how you can know you belong to God. We will discuss these in the following chapters.

All of this will help you do something the Bible says is important: *“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves”* (2 Cor 13:5). Elsewhere the Bible says, *“Work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen”* (2 Pet 1:10). Certainty of forever forgiveness is not automatic. You must know how to discern real saving faith in Christ and carefully *“examine”* your life to ensure the necessary qualities are there. You need to *“prove”* to yourself that your trust in Christ is real and not fake. And again, the Apostle John gives us the spiritual tests needed to do this.

Unfortunately, many people ignore or misunderstand the biblical attributes of a real Christian. They think that just claiming to be a Christian or going to church is enough proof. But the Apostle John exposed such things as inadequate. As you will see, the biblical tests for real Christians reflect the fact that they have God’s Spirit living inside of them. Many people without God’s Spirit and who are not real Christians, still claim to be Christians, go to church, and even do Christian ministry. If you never feel the need to *“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine.”* (2 Cor 13:5), then perhaps your standards are not high enough.

Some approach the topic of the assurance of salvation by asking the question, *“How much can a person sin and still be considered a Christian?”* The Bible never answers such a question. This is because the answer is primarily intended to give false Christians some kind of false assurance. Instead, the Bible commands: *“Work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen”* (2 Pet 1:10). The result of this approach is to give real Christians real assurance.

One of the reasons you may be afraid to *“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine”* (2 Cor 13:5) is because you are afraid you will fail the test. But everything God commands us to do is always the best thing for our life. Such examination will only have two results and both are very valuable.

First, God is confident that a real Christian will only become more convinced of their relationship with Him when they *“examine”* themselves. Such examination and testing results in more certainty for the real Christian.

Secondly, if you believe you are a Christian and have God’s forgiveness, but you are deceived about this, then God wants to reveal this to you. Being deceived about the most important thing in your life will hurt your life and even your eternity. It is easy to believe you are a Christian but really are not. Jesus warned:

Many people will say to Me on Judgment Day, “Lord! Lord! We spoke revelations from you, cast out demons, and performed many miracles, all in Your name.” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you. Depart from Me. You were doing evil things!” (Matt 7:22-23 DEV)

A person can do a lot of spiritual looking things and still not be a Christian. This is another reason the Apostle John gave us clear and convincing attributes of a real Christian. If your study of these chapters leads you to doubt you are a real Christian, there is still hope. As explained in the previous chapter, you can ask God to open your heart and reveal the real Jesus Christ to you.

Along these lines, Dr. Stott writes regarding the Apostle John's letters:

John's arguments are like a double-edged sword. When he seeks to help believers know they have eternal life, he equally seeks to show unbelievers that they do not. His purpose is to destroy the false certainty of false Christians, but also to confirm the valid certainty of genuine believers.

The same two groups exist today. Some claim a saving faith they do not have. Others are real Christians but have no certainty they are and believe it is arrogant to even claim this. But there is a true Christian certainty, which is not arrogant or mislead. But as the Apostle John teaches, is the will of God for His people. So John urges his readers to examine themselves, and he supplies tests by which we can do so.⁵

Again, we will study these tests of true saving faith in the following chapters. God wants His children to be certain they are forgiven forever and have eternal life. Which is why the Apostle John said: "*I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life*" (1 John 5:13).

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite Romans 3:20-23 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize 1 John 5:13 from the translation above or another.
- ▶ Read the next chapter to prepare for your discussion this week.

¹ The question of whether a real born again Christian can lose their salvation is a vital topic for discussing Christian certainty about their salvation. The *Christian Essentials* are written from the belief that "once saved, always saved" is biblical. That view is discussed and defended in the section Your Father's Acceptance in study #3 *FAITH*.

² John Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Tyndale, 1999), 50, 54.

³ The Apostle John's statement that we are not to be afraid of God's punishment (cf. 1 John 4:18) may seem to contradict the NT warnings of God disciplining His children (cf. Heb 12:5-11). But even Hebrews says the prospect of divine discipline is to encourage us, not make us fearful (cf. v. 5). For more study on God's discipline for the Christian see the section on Your Father's Acceptance in *Christian Essentials* study #3: *FAITH*.

⁴ Translations and commentators differ on whether John intended to say "*your*"

joy or “*our*” joy in 1 John 1:4. Most conclude “our” is the original. However, Dr. Stott points out: “This need not be understood as referring exclusively to the author and those associated with him, but may well include the readers, ‘you . . . with us’ as in verse 3” (65). The NLT used here accurately captures this sense.

⁵ John Stott, 52-53.

Chapter 1.7

Why You Can Be Certain You Are Forgiven Forever

1 John 4:13

Week 3

- ▶ For a God Time use the “P.O.W.E.R. Plan” in Appendix A.
- ▶ After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:
 - 1) Why do we say that becoming a Christian is not merely making a decision? What do you think?
 - 2) How does God’s Spirit enable us to be certain we have eternal life and forgiveness?
 - 3) What place do feelings have in knowing if you are a Christian?
 - 4) What is the consequence of a Christian “*quenching the Spirit*”?
 - 5) What was most meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. (1 John 4:13).

You read in the previous chapter that God wants you to be certain your sins are completely and forever forgiven and you possess eternal life. But how can you be certain? The primary point of this chapter is:

God’s Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are forgiven forever.

A) God’s Spirit indwells the Christian and seals and guarantees their salvation

In chapter 1.5 (section D) you read:

Any human can logically understand what the Bible says about Jesus Christ. But it requires a MIRACLE from God to enable you to personally trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and love Him as your King. This is the kind of believing that saves you from God’s punishment for your sins. The Bible says that humans are not naturally born with the ability to trust and love Christ in this way.

Therefore, it is important to understand that becoming a Christian is not merely making a decision. It is not choosing to change religions or join a group. It is not choosing to change certain bad habits. Likewise, being born into a Christian family does not make you a Christian either.

So what does God do to make you a Christian? Jesus explained:

I tell you the truth, no one is able to enter the Kingdom of God if they are only naturally born coming out of water like all babies. You must also be supernaturally reborn through God's Spirit. Humans can only give birth to physical life. But the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. Do not be amazed that I said you must be born again from God by the Holy Spirit. (John 3:5-7 DEV 1)

You read in chapter 1.2 Jesus' famous statement in John 3:16 which says, "God the Father loved the world so much that He gave up His one and only Son. He did this so that whoever trusts in His Son will not be destroyed but have eternal life." But just a few verses earlier in John 3:7 Jesus said, "you must be born again from God by the Holy Spirit." These two things must be put together to truly understand how someone becomes a Christian. Everyone who truly trusts God the Son to pay for their sins will also be "born again from God by the Holy Spirit." There are no exceptions.

2

God's Spirit indwells every person who has real faith in Christ. The Bible says:

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

If a person is indwelt with God's Spirit, they have eternal life and will always be indwelt with God's Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote:

When you trusted the Good News about Christ, you were sealed and marked by the Holy Spirit as God the Father promised. God's Spirit in you is His pledge that He guarantees our inheritance in His Kingdom. The Holy Spirit will remain in you until Christ returns and rescues those who belong to God the Father. (Eph 1:13-14 DEV

3)

This is a repeated promise throughout the NT (cf. John 6:27; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 4:30). The Greek word used here for "seal" is the same word used to describe the sealing of Christ's tomb (cf. Matt 27:66) or the sealing of Satan in prison by the Angel of God (cf. Rev 20:3). It means a security guaranteed by God.

Therefore, the key to being certain you are a Christian and forgiven forever is to know if you possess God's Spirit in you. This is why the Bible says, "God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us" (1 John 4:13). God's Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are forgiven forever.

B) God's Spirit living in you will have powerful affects

God's Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are a Christian. How do you know if you have sincerely trusted in Christ and been "*born again*" by God's Spirit? The Spirit of God will live in you and give you new spiritual life. Again, becoming a Christian is not just making a decision or changing your life. It is about God radically changing your life. God has given this amazing promise to all who truly trust in Christ:

I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. (Ezek 36:26-27) ⁴

The invasion of God's Spirit into your spirit will have immediate and obvious effects. He "*will give you a new heart, and . . . a new spirit.*" Did you used to live in sin and even loved it? Do you now greatly desire to be free of sin and please the Lord? That is the Holy Spirit living in you. Were you once rather confident that your own good deeds were good enough to gain God's forgiveness? Do you now understand that you are a sinner deserving punishment? That is the Holy Spirit working in you. Did you use to feel like God was distant and uncaring about you? Were you trying to hide from Him? Do you now feel like God is real and He loves you? That is the Holy Spirit indwelling you.

Some real Christians doubt their forever forgiveness because they cannot remember when they became a Christian. But it does not matter if you cannot pinpoint the exact moment when the Holy Spirit indwelled you. It is sufficient to look back and evaluate how the Holy Spirit has changed you. The Holy Spirit only and always indwells real Christians. His influence in your life will be the proof that you have been forgiven forever by God.

The Apostle John wrote: "*We know he lives in us because the Spirit he gave us lives in us*" (1 John 3:24). Likewise, John also wrote the primary text for this chapter: "*God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us*" (1 John 4:13). God's Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are forgiven forever.

C) The indwelling of God's Spirit will change your desires, lifestyle and feelings

What will be the obvious effects of the Spirit of God indwelling you? New and holy desires, habits, and feelings. In other words, the Holy Spirit will begin to make you holy.

First, He will give you DESIRES to obey God and love people. You will never do these perfectly, especially as a young Christian. But your

ATTITUDE toward God, sin, and people will be radically and instantly changed. A DESIRE to please God and love people will immediately become the greatest desires you have. You might struggle to follow those desires, but they will be there like never before.

It can be helpful to compare your new desires to those you had before trusting in Christ. Also, compare your desires to those that do not have Christ in their life. If you are spiritually born again by the Holy Spirit you will recognize a hatred for sin and love for God that you did not have before, or that non-Christians do not have.

Some Christians doubt their relationship with God because they struggle with sin. But this may actually be evidence they are a Christian. People without the Holy Spirit usually pursue the pleasures of sin rather than resisting sin. The Bible describes Christians in this way: *“The Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other”* (Gal 5:17). A Christian’s struggle against sinful habits and desires is evidence they are a Christian. So it is important to look at your victories over sin, instead of just focus on your failures.

Secondly, the holy desires of a real Christian will result in a new LIFESTYLE. The Apostle John writes: *“No one who is born of God will live sinfully because God’s seed lives in them. They cannot habitually sin because they have been born of God”* (1 John 3:9 DEV 5). When a certain kind of seed is planted in the ground and grows, it produces a certain kind of life. Likewise, when a person is *“born of God”* by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, *“God’s seed lives in them.”* That *“seed”* of the Holy Spirit will grow into an increasing LIFESTYLE of holiness in the *“born again”* (John 3:7) Christian.

The Bible says: *“The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”* (Gal 5:22-23). These virtues will begin operating in a person’s life when *“the Holy Spirit”* indwells them at the time they truly trust in Christ. If a person claims they are a Christian, but continues to demonstrate a LIFESTYLE of selfishness, fear, harshness, stinginess, arrogance, and a lack of control over their sinful emotions and actions, they probably do not have the Spirit of God living in them and are not a real Christian. Again, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will produce immediate and radical effects in the person’s life.

This does not mean that real Christians will not sin. John wrote in the same letter: *“If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth”* (1 John 1:8). But the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will not allow the Christian to have a LIFESTYLE of sin. A new hatred for sin and love for God will ensure this. People who claim to be Christians but are addicted to sinful and destructive behavior need to seriously question if they are a Christian. The Bible says:

Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.

Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

Again, real Christians will struggle with sin. But they will not live a LIFESTYLE of the sins listed above or others.

Another sign of the indwelling of God's Spirit is spiritual growth. Everything that is alive also grows. Because of the indwelling of God's Spirit, a real Christian has spiritual life. A lack of spiritual growth is an indication of spiritual death and the absence of the Spirit in a person's life. Therefore, an inability to overcome sinful habits is a sign that a person does not have God's Spirit in them.

Christians have a unique power and ability to permanently change sinful habits and behavior in their life. To "*be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind*" (Rom 12:2 NIV). This is because the indwelling of the Holy Spirit has dethroned the distorting sinful nature in them so they can now correctly understand, value, and trust the word of God that changes them. God's word will not change the character of someone who does not have God's Spirit. As we quoted the Bible earlier in chapter 1.5:

The merely natural person without God's Spirit does not value and trust the truths that come from God's Spirit. This is because these truths sound foolish to them and they cannot grasp their importance because they can only be properly evaluated with God's Spirit. (1 Cor 2:14 DEV ⁶)

The power of God's Spirit and God's word will continue to enable a real Christian to overcome sinful habits and change their behavior to become more like Christ who lives in them. A false Christian will lack the power to change sinful habits, even the ones they desire to change.

Finally, many Christians claim that FEELINGS are not a good indication of your true spiritual state. But this is unbiblical. As noted above, "*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace*" (Gal 5:22). Love, joy, and peace certainly include FEELINGS. In fact, how you feel is a vital measure of whether or not you are a born again Christian. A lack of FEELING compassion, joy, and peace, and a constant and controlling FEELING of anger, discouragement, depression, and worry are signs that a person is not indwelt with God's Spirit.

Many people have been fooled into thinking they are a Christian because they simply attend church or do church activities. But if they do

these things out of a sense of guilt or duty, instead of the genuine love and joy of God's Spirit, they probably are not a Christian. Remember, a real Christian does things because they know God loves them and they want to love God back. A false Christian does Christian things because they believe they still need to earn God's love and forgiveness. Their motivation for serving God is fear and guilt or wanting people to like and accept them.

That is not the love, joy, and peace of God's Spirit. Many people are trying to live the "Christian" life in their own will power, often feeling like they need to force themselves to have love, joy, and peace. If these things constantly feel hard to do, then it may be an indication that you do not have the Holy Spirit and are not a real Christian.

The fruit of God's Spirit in your life is the proof of your complete and forever forgiveness. This is one reason why the Bible says: "*Do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live*" (Eph 4:30).

Unfortunately, a real Christian can grieve or "*quench the Spirit*" (1 Thess 5:19 NIV) in their life. When they do, they are not experiencing the love, joy, and peace of God's Spirit. This can cause them to doubt their relationship with God. And if an absence of the Spirit's love, joy, and peace persists, they should have doubts. Sin will never cause the real Christian to lose their relationship with God. But especially powerful and persistent sin can and should cause a real Christian to lose their confidence in their relationship with God. This is why the Bible says, "*Work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen*" (2 Pet 1:10).

The Bible says: "*God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us*" (1 John 4:13). God's Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are forgiven forever.⁷

D) False signs of the Spirit

It is important to understand the real effects of God's Spirit in the born again Christian's life. This is because many claim to have God's Spirit but do not. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jesus warned that "*many,*" not just a few, of those who claim revelations from God, cast out demons, and even perform miracles, even using the name of Jesus, do it all without God's Spirit and are not Christians (cf. Matt 7:22-23)! Likewise, the Apostle Paul warned of fake Christians who, "*will act as if they serve God but will not have his power. Stay away from those people*" (2 Tim 3:5). So again, you must clearly understand what the true effects of being born again by the Holy Spirit are.

As noted above, lasting and consistent feelings of compassion, joy, and peace are important results of God's Spirit living in us. But temporary emotions can be deceiving. Jesus warned there will be "*those who hear the message [about Jesus Christ] and immediately receive it with joy. . . But they don't last long [and] fall away*" (Matt 13:20-21).

Many people have been fooled into thinking that because they experience high emotions in a church worship service or “revival” meeting that this is evidence of the Holy Spirit in their life. The Holy Spirit certainly wants to affect our emotions in a positive way. But being excited by stimulating music or a charismatic speaker in an enthusiastic crowd of people can easily happen without the Holy Spirit or real conversion to saving faith. Usually the false Christians who attend such meetings do not demonstrate the true signs of a Christian in the rest of their life. The born again experience will produce a lasting and durable love, joy, and peace, not merely fleeting emotional highs coming from emotional stimulation.

“*God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us*” (1 John 4:13). God’s Spirit lives inside every real Christian and the effects will prove they are forgiven forever.

- ▶ Return to the beginning and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite 1 John 5:13 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize 1 John 4:13 from the translation above or another.
- ▶ Read the next chapter to discuss with your small group this week.

¹ (John 3:5-7 DEV)- “*Naturally born coming out of water like all babies*” translates the Greek phrase *gennēthē ex hydatos*; which literally means “born coming out of water.” The Greek preposition *ex* can mean “marker denoting the direction from which something comes” (BDAG #2).

There is a surprising and unnecessary denial that Jesus was talking about natural birth when he referred to being “*born coming out of water*.” Most modern scholars suggest that it simply describes another way of being born of the Spirit and Jesus is not talking about two kinds of births at all (cf. Carson, *PNTC*, 191-196; Morris, *NICNT*, 190-193, MacArthur, *John*). For example, D.A. Carson and John MacArthur object that, “There are no ancient [literary] sources that picture natural birth as ‘from water’” (Carson, 191). But of course, the fact that a sack of water surrounds a baby in the womb was well known by even ancient people.

Others suggest that being “*born coming out of water*” in John 3:5 refers to Christian baptism (cf. C. K. Barret, *The Gospel of John* [SPCK, 1978], 209). But this would suggest salvation is by human works rather than faith and God’s grace and work. As noted elsewhere in this *FORGIVENESS* study, water baptism does not make a person a Christian (cf. section 1.9.A).

Contrary to all the debate about what Jesus meant by being “*born coming out of water*” the text makes His meaning clear. First, Jesus Himself explains what He meant in the very next sentence when he refers to “*being born coming out of water*” as “*Humans can only give birth to physical life*” (literally, “flesh gives birth to flesh”). Here Jesus is clearly referring to the natural birth of babies and therefore He is clearly referring to the same thing in the previous sentence by being “*born coming out of water*.”

Secondly, Jesus’ reference to being “*born coming out of water*” was in

response to Nicodemus' statement in the previous sentence that a person "cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb" (v. 4). In order to respond to Nicodemus' confusion, Jesus said being born physically (even a second time) is not enough to enter the Kingdom, but you must be born spiritually.

Thirdly, remember that Jesus and the Apostles repeatedly taught against the Jewish belief that people were saved merely by being naturally born a Jew (cf. Luke 3:8; John 8:33-41; Rom 9:7-8). Christ's insistence here that mere natural birth, even as a Jew, was not enough to "enter the Kingdom of God" would have served His repeated purpose in teaching Jews like Nicodemus.

The eminent Bible teacher R. C. Sproul said of this passage: "I have struggled with this text for more than forty years, but I'm still not completely sure what it means." Still, he summed it up correctly:

Clearly Jesus was acknowledging that everyone has a natural birth. But Jesus said that in addition to our natural birth, something more must happen before we can see the kingdom of God, and that is to be supernaturally born. . .

No one is [naturally] born a Christian. The flesh does not produce redemption. This was a common error the Jewish people made. They thought because they were Jews, being descended from Abraham, that they belonged to the people of God and would enter heaven. The New Testament teachers had to show them this was not the case.

Likewise, you may have been born to Christian parents, raised in a Christian home, and gone to a Christian school. But none of those things makes you a Christian. All that your natural birth gives you is flesh, and flesh alone is powerless to enter the kingdom of God. Unless you are born of the Spirit of the living God, whatever you do in your flesh will avail nothing toward entering the kingdom of God. (*John* [Reformed Trust, 2010], 37-39)

"*Born again from God*" translates the Greek word *anōthen* which can mean both "from above" or "again" (*BDAG*, #1, #4). The DEV reflects both meanings because both are true of spiritual regeneration. By "being born from above" would seem to mean "being born from God" as a child of God.

² NT scholar John Stott writes regarding the Apostle John's teaching on the Spirit's work in Christian conversion:

It is only if God has given us His Spirit that we are able to believe, love, and obey God (1 John 3:24; 4:13). So everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, and loves and does right gives evidence that they "have been born of God" (cf. 2:29; 4:7; 5:1). (*1 John*, 53).

³ (Eph 1:13-14 DEV)- "*Sealed and marked*" translates the Greek word *esphragisthēte* meaning both "to provide a seal as a security measure" and "to mark with a seal as a means of ownership" (*BDAG* #1, #3). There is no need to choose between the two as the word means both and one leads to the other. The Holy Spirit both seals us for security and marks us belonging to God.

"*Until Christ returns and rescues*" translates the Greek phrase *eis apolytrōsin* which literally means "until the rescue." The common translation of "redemption" here seems unwise as such "Christianeze" means to many something like "buy back, ransom." But the Greek *apolytrōsin* means "to release from a captive condition" (*BDAG* #2). The DEV simply explains the truth that

our rescue will occur at the return of Christ.

“*Who belong to God the Father*” translates *tēs peripoiēseōs* which literally means “the possession.” NT scholar John Stott explains that some translations such as the RSV and ESV obscure the meaning here by suggesting the “possession” is ours and not God’s. However, “Considering the Greek used and its OT background it is clear that Paul is alluding to the church as God’s ‘possession’ (cf. NIV) (*Ephesians*, 47; Peter O’Brien argues for this as well, *PNTC*, 121-122).

NT scholar Peter O’Brien summarizes:

By giving believers the Spirit, God ‘seals’ or stamps them as his own now, and he will protect them through the trials and testings of this life until he takes final possession of them. . . According to 2 Corinthians 1:22 the believers received the ‘down payment’ of the Spirit to guarantee their future salvation. . . In giving the Holy Spirit to us, God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it. (120-121)

⁴ Ezekiel 36:26-27 is an OT promise that has been fulfilled in Christians during the Church Age. This is common in the NT. For example, when Christians were first indwelt by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd: “*what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel*” who said, “*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people*” (Acts 2:16-17).

⁵ (1 John 3:9 DEV) - “*Live sinfully*” translates the Greek word *poiei* which can mean “practice” (*BDAG*; cf. NLT, NASB, ESV, NET). John Stott writes: “It is not the isolated act of sin which John is referring to, but the settled habit of it, indicated by the verb *poiein*, to practice.” (126).

“*Habitually sin*” translates the Greek present infinitive *hamartanein* which Dr. Stott remarks: “If the infinitive [verb] had been [in the] aorist [tense] it would have meant ‘he is not able to commit a sin.’ However, the present [tense] infinitive means, ‘he is not able to habitually sin’.” (Ibid.).

⁶ (1 Cor 2:14 DEV). For notes on this translation see endnotes in chapter 1.5.

⁷ This section has described what theologians call “the testimony of the Spirit.” Many have believed that this “testimony” is some sort of mystical, subjective, and direct revelation from God’s Spirit telling us that we are Christians. Some have even interpreted the primary text of this chapter in this way: “*God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us*” (1 John 4:13).

However, Dr. Stott writes concerning 1 John 3:24 (“*We know he lives in us because the Spirit he gave us lives in us*”):

It may at first sight seem that this reference to the Holy Spirit within us introduces a subjective criterion of assurance . . . But this is not so. The Spirit whose presence is the test of Christ’s living in us, manifests himself objectively in our life and conduct. (cf. 4:1ff.). It is also he who empowers us to live righteously and to love our brothers and sisters (cf. 1 John 4:1ff; 13; 2:20, 27; Gal 5:16, 22).

So if we would set our hearts at rest, when they accuse and condemn us, we must look for [objective moral] evidence of the Spirit’s working, and particularly whether he is enabling us to believe in Christ, to obey God’s commands and to love our brothers. (1 John, 154-5)

No amount of subjective, peaceful, self-affirming feelings about one's relationship and standing with God can, or should, make up for a lack of the objective moral evidence of one's life. In the Bible, the "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation is the objective fruits of the Spirit including love, joy, and peace. A subjective and mystical foundation for our assurance is no foundation because even spirits must be tested objectively (cf. 1 John 4:1-3).

Unfortunately, an emphasis on some sort of subjective and mystical assurance of our salvation has resulted in two things. First, it has given some an excuse to ignore a lack of objective evidence, leading to a false assurance. Secondly, it has made it difficult for real Christians to be sure of their salvation because they are instructed not to evaluate evidence they can see in their desires and behavior.

For further discussion of Christian assurance, including a critique of the common view of "the testimony of the Spirit" see Kurt Jurgensmeier, *Biblical Authority*, chapter 3.6; online at: <https://trainingtimothys.org/books/book-3-biblical-authority/>.

Chapter 1.8

How You Can Be Certain You Are Forgiven Forever

1 John 3:10

Week 3

- ▶ For a God Time use the “P.O.W.E.R. Plan” in Appendix A.
- ▶ After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:
 - 1) On a scale of 1 to 100% how certain are you that you will go to Heaven?
 - 2) This chapter describes at least 5 important proofs that you love God and are a real Christian. What are they?
 - 3) How would you describe loving the world? Why is this a sign you do not love God?
 - 4) Why is your response to persecution and painful difficulties a good test of your love for God?
 - 5) What is real Christian love? Why is it a good proof that you are a real Christian?
 - 6) What was especially meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

Joanna was so glad that the Bible gave her a clear and convincing way of knowing for certain she was a Christian. She had been taught that you must simply trust God that you are a Christian because God is trustworthy. That sounded spiritual, but it did not answer her question: How could she really know she had truly trusted Christ for her complete and forever forgiveness? Thankfully, she learned the Bible answers that question in a very simple but tangible way. The Bible says:

Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God. (1 John 3:10)

Loving God and loving people is the proof you have been forgiven forever.

A) Your forever forgiveness is proven by your new love for God

In the previous chapter it was explained that the fruits and powers of God’s Spirit in a real Christian will prove their forever forgiveness. One of the primary ways God’s Spirit will affect you is giving you a new love for God. How do you know if you love God? Jesus said, “*If you love me, obey my commandments*” (John 14:15). A vital sign that you have received the Holy Spirit and been forgiven for your sins and is a great desire to obey Jesus. How do you know that you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior? As written in a previous chapter, you trust Him to be your King and live like it.

Many want Jesus to only be their Savior because they are afraid of being punished for their sins. But their life shows little desire or power to live like Jesus is their King. This is why the word “disciple” (follower) in the Bible is synonymous with being a Christian. Every real Christian is a disciple, a follower of the commands of Christ. Therefore, the Bible says: “*Anyone who does not live righteously . . . does not belong to God*” (1 John 3:10). Likewise the Bible says:

We can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. If someone claims, “I know God,” but doesn’t obey God’s commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God’s word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)

A desire and lifestyle of obeying the commandments of God in the NT is a primary proof that you love God and are a Christian.

But mere obedience is not enough. Your motives matter. Many false Christians live moral lives because they feel fear or guilt toward God. They view God as more of a demanding task master than a gracious Father. Their false version of Christianity is a religion of laws instead of a relationship of love with God.

Still, they convince themselves they must be accepted by God because of their good deeds like going to church, giving money, and being nice to people. But if they are honest, they do not experience the joy, peace, and power of God’s Spirit. Trying to live the Christian life in their own will power becomes a joyless burden motivated by their guilt instead of God’s grace. All of this is because they really are not indwelled with God’s Spirit.

In contrast, the Bible says living for “*the kingdom of God*” on this Earth “*is . . . a matter of . . . righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God*” (Rom 14:17-18). Real Christianity is not just about “*righteousness*” because the kind of moral living empowered by God’s Spirit, instead of human guilt, will also come with “*peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” And it is only those “*who serve Christ*” with “*peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” that are “*pleasing to God.*”

Beware if Christianity feels more like a religion of laws to you rather than a relationship of love with the Lord. Remember, the Apostle Paul “*was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law*” and he was “*count[ing] on [his] own righteousness through obeying the law*” (Phil 3:5, 9) to be accepted by God. But he admitted he had no real relationship with God.

Likewise, Lydia is described in the Bible as a woman “*who worshiped God.*” But it wasn’t until “*the Lord opened her heart*” that “*she accepted what Paul was saying*” about Jesus and became a Christian (Acts 16:14). This was evidenced by her willingness to be baptized and invite the

Christians to live in her home (v. 15). Mere religious morality is not enough evidence of true Christian faith. The powers of love, joy, and peace from God's Spirit need to accompany our righteousness.

A real love for God will result in several other things as well. First, you will love God's word. Again, the Bible speaks of "*those on their way to destruction, because they refuse to love and accept the truth that would save them*" (2 Thess 2:10). God's Spirit will give you a love for God's word. This is why the Bible says, "*Like newborn babies, crave the pure spiritual milk of God's word so you can grow in Christian maturity*" (1 Pet 2:2 DEV¹). A real Christian will "*crave . . . God's word.*"

How is a love for God's word demonstrated? Do you have a great desire to read and understand the Bible? Do you enjoy listening to the Bible being taught? Do you have a strong sense that the Bible is God's word to you? Do the promises of Scripture encourage you? Do the commands in Scripture express your deepest desires? People who say they are a Christian but do not have much interest in reading, learning, or obeying the Bible probably do not have the Spirit of God in them.

False Christians will be repelled by the preaching of God's word because they do not want to be convicted of their sin. Real Christians, however, invite the conviction of the Spirit in their lives so they can spiritually grow (cf. John 3:19-21).

However, a real love for God's word will not result in a lack of love for people. Mere "*knowledge*" of the Bible can "*puff up*" (1 Cor 8:1) the person without God's Spirit. Divisive arguments over different interpretations of Scripture is the fruit of pride, not God's Spirit. The Bible describes such people as:

Anyone who teaches something different [than the Apostle's taught] is arrogant and lacks understanding. Such a person has an unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words. This stirs up arguments ending in jealousy, division, slander, and evil suspicions. These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. (1 Tim 6:4-5)

Loving God's word will not decrease a love for God's people and a desire for unity. Therefore, mere knowledge of God's word is not a true sign of loving God's word. The Bible says, "*Don't just listen to God's word [and have mere knowledge]. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves*" (James 1:22).

Another proof of love for God is not loving money. Jesus said, "*No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money*" (Matt 6:24). Both money and Jesus cannot be your King. Being "*devoted*" to making and spending money is to "*despise*" Jesus.

Your relationship with money is one of the best measures of your relationship with God. This is why GENEROSITY is a very important proof that someone is a Christian. If a person claims to be a Christian but has no desire to give generously to the financial needs of a local church, then they may not be a Christian. Being stingy with your money is evidence that Jesus is not your master, nor your Savior.

A sinful love for money is related to another proof of being a Christian: you are not worldly. The Bible says: *“If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God”* (James 4:4). Likewise Scripture says:

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions.
(1 John 2:15-16)

Having a real faith and love for Jesus Christ, and being indwelt with God’s Spirit, will radically change what you VALUE in this world. Before conversion to Christianity, people seek the pleasures of sin, are attracted to the money, success, and power of the world, and are repelled by the demands of a holy and sacrificial Christian life. But the real Christian loves to be generous, to serve and help others, and lives to please God.

These different desires and values in the real Christian will cause opposition from people devoted to the world’s values. This is why Jesus says to all Christians:

The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. (John 15:19)

Are you willing to be hated by worldly people because you love God? A willingness to be rejected by people because of your commitment to God is powerful proof you really love God. This is why Jesus warned of false Christians, *“who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But . . . they don’t last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God’s word”* (Matt 13:20-21).

God allows “problems” and persecution in a person’s life for the purpose of testing their love for Him. The Apostle Peter wrote: *“At the present time you may need to be grieved by a variety of testing for a little while. The purpose of these tests is to discover if your faith is genuine”* (1 Pet 1:6-7 DEV). Likewise, the Bible says, *“The person who endures testing is happy because they have been proven to be genuine and will receive the crown of eternal life that God has promised to those who love him”* (James 1:12 DEV; cf. Rom 5:3-5; Phil 1:28). A person’s response to painful circumstances is one of the best tests of true love for God.

The Bible says: “*Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God*” (1 John 3:10). Loving God and loving people is the proof you have been forgiven forever. This is especially true when you need to trust and obey God in difficult circumstances or be patient and kind to difficult people.

B) Your forever forgiveness is proven by your new love for people

Our text says a real Christian will also love people. The Bible says:

If we love our Christian brothers and sisters, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still [spiritually] dead. . . Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence. (1 John 3:14, 18-19).

Real Christian love is the real Christian proof that you are a real Christian. Unfortunately, most people do not understand what real Christian love is. Christian love is an unconditional patience and kindness toward people, even if they do not love you. ² The Bible says:

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It is not self-seeking. It does not become irritated. It keeps no record of being wronged. (1 Cor 13:4-5 DEV)

Before people become Christians they think primarily of themselves and how they can be happy. But when the Spirit of God comes to live in you, you begin to primarily think of others and how to help them be happy. You are not “*self-seeking*.” You have a new desire and power to want what is best for others and to seek to serve them.

Real Christians want to be around other Christians, attend church services, and other fellowship meetings. They want to love the Father by loving His children. In fact, loving people becomes the drive of their life.

Some claim to be Christians but do not even join a local church. Their reason may be that they have been hurt by Christians or have not found a church good enough for them. But these are not excuses that God would accept. A lack of interest in spending time with Christians reveals a heart that does not love Christians and is not indwelt with God’s Spirit. The Bible says of such people:

These people left our churches, but they never really belonged with us; otherwise they would have stayed with us. When they left, it proved that they did not belong with us. (1 John 2:19)

There can be good reasons to leave a local church. But people who never commit to one should have serious questions about their Christian faith.

Remember that love, acceptance, patience, and forgiveness toward other Christians is the clearest evidence someone is a Christian. People who refuse to commit to a local church usually lack these very things.

It is possible to be a hurting Christian and avoid fellowship for a while. But a real Christian will never be happy about this. However, when a false Christian leaves the fellowship, they often experience an enduring relief and have no desire to embrace the “burdens” of Christian responsibilities.

God expects the Christian’s love for people to be greater than those who do not have God’s Spirit in them. This is why Jesus taught:

Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. . . If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. (Matt 5:44-47)

“Pagans” without God’s Spirit can love those who love them and be kind to their friends. But only a person controlled by God’s Spirit can be patient, kind, and compassionate toward those who hate them. Or as mentioned above, how we respond to persecution and difficult people is one of the best tests of whether or not we are a real Christian. Only real Christians have the power to unconditionally love people who hate them. This is why such love is such a powerful proof of a real relationship with God.

However, an equally powerful test of love is how we treat the people closest to us. Would your spouse, children, and parents say you are a loving person? That you love them more than yourself? It does not matter if neighbors and workmates think you are a nice person. Anyone can do that without God.

A love for people obviously includes forgiving people. As noted above, Christian love, “*keeps no record of being wronged*” (1 Cor 13:5). Real Christians have the desire and ability to forgive the people that have hurt them. Because God has forgiven them for everything, He expects all Christians to forgive others. This is why Jesus said:

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt 6:14-15).

This is because your refusal to forgive others reveals that you were never a Christian and never had your sins forgiven by God. ³

Finally, the Holy Spirit will give you a new love for those who are not Christians. You will greatly desire for them to have the peace and forgiveness you have through trusting in Jesus Christ.

The Bible says: “*Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God*” (1 John 3:10). Loving God and loving people is the proof you have been forgiven forever.

C) Good deeds do not earn your forever forgiveness but they prove you have been forgiven forever

In summary, the Bible says: “*Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God*” (Matt 3:8). To repent is to change your mind and life to hate sin and love God. You can know your faith in Christ is real and His Spirit is in you, if you have new desires to know the Bible, obey the Bible, and love Christians. The Bible says:

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? [the answer is no] . . . Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless? (Jms 2:14, 20)

The role of good deeds in Christianity can be confusing. As discussed in chapter 1.4 of this study, your good deeds cannot pay for your sin or earn God's forgiveness. In other words, before you become a Christian, your good deeds are worthless. But when God gives you the gift of trusting Christ to pay for your sins, He gives you something else: the Holy Spirit indwelling you. And this will result in good deeds. And it is these good deeds that prove you are indwelt with the Holy Spirit and are a real Christian. ⁴

The Bible says: “*Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God*” (1 John 3:10). Loving God and loving people is the proof you have been forgiven forever. ⁵

- ▶ Return to the beginning and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite 1 John 4:13 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize 1 John 3:10 in the translation above or another.
- ▶ Meet with your Barnabas Group this week to discuss chapters 1.6-1.8.

¹ (1 Pet 2:2 DEV)- “*Of God's word*” is implied by the reference to “pure spiritual milk” that enables the Christian to grow. Only Scripture is “pure” and free from any error or deception. Our claim that Peter is referring to God's word in 2:2 is supported by the fact that Scripture is the topic of the previous three verses, 1:23-25. As NT scholar I. H. Marshall writes: “The Word of God that brought Christians to birth (vs. 1:23-25) will continue to grow them” (*1 Peter* [Intervarsity, 1991], 64). In addition, many note that Peter intended to connect the use of the Greek words *logos* (“word”) in verses 1:23-25 and *logikos* (“spiritual”) in 2:2 to indicate that the source of their spiritual nourishment would be the word of God. (cf. *TNTC*, 95-96; Peter Achtemeier, *1 Peter* [Fortress, 1996], 147).

“*In Christian maturity*” better explains the literal Greek text, “grow up with

reference to salvation” (cf, *BDAG* #5). As Dr. Grudem states, this is a reference to “growing toward Christian maturity” (*TNTC*, 96).

² For further discussion on real Christian love see the chapter on love in *Christian Essentials* study #4: *FRUIT*.

³ Matthew 6:14-15 is a startling statement. The respected Bible teacher J. M. Boice remarked:

We do not earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. We know that because of the Bible’s teaching elsewhere. . . Some have explained it by distinguishing between forgiveness which gives us a permanent right standing with God, and forgiveness for sins committed day by day which break our fellowship with God. (*Matthew 1-17* [Baker, 2001], 100).

But as thoroughly explained elsewhere in the *Christian Essentials*, the Bible does not teach that our sins separate the Christian from God in any way (cf. study #3: *FAITH*, section on (“Your Father’s Acceptance”). Accordingly, Boice writes: “A better explanation is that we must have a profound change of heart, expressed in a willingness to forgive others if we have experienced God’s forgiveness ourselves.”

Likewise, NT scholar Leon Morris simply explains: “Jesus is saying that to fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God” (*Matthew*, [Eerdmans, 1992], 149). Likewise NT scholar Michael Green writes: “If we are to open our hearts to receive his gracious pardon, we cannot keep our fists clenched against those who have wronged us” (*The Message of Matthew* [Intervarsity, 2000], 101).

Likewise, Jesus taught earlier in the same sermon, “*If you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! . . . And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell*” (Matt 5:22).

Jesus’ warning to unforgiving false Christians is illustrated in His parable of the unforgiving servant (cf. Matt 18:21-35). What was the result of the servant’s refusal to forgive another servant? Jesus concluded: “*Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart*” (v. 34-35).

An inability to forgive someone for their sins against you, is proof that you have not truly received and experienced God’s forgiveness for your sins. This is a sobering warning to Christians to make sure they have forgiven anyone they are bitter or hardened towards, in order for them to be sure they are a Christian themselves.

⁴ Unfortunately, some Christians confuse the purpose of good works in the Christian life. In an effort to be clear that salvation is by grace and not good works, they ignore the need for good works to prove salvation. For example, the rightly respected and popular Christian leader Rick Warren has written in answer to the question, How do I know I am saved?:

Your assurance of salvation is not by your works, because you can’t earn your salvation. Your assurance of salvation is not by your feelings, because feelings come and go. What is your assurance of salvation? The promise of God’s Word. If God says it, that settles it, because God cannot lie. You can trust the promise of God’s Word. You can rest in it. (online at:

<http://pastorrick.com/devotional/english/how-do-i-know-i-m-saved>).

The author confuses the “assurance of salvation” with how we obtain salvation. We obtain salvation by grace. We prove salvation with deeds. Also contrary to the author, and as discussed in this chapter, feelings play a vital role in being sure we are a Christian (cf. Gal 5:22).

There is an unfortunate and unbiblical trend in modern Christianity to deny the Bible’s claim that our salvation is proven by our good deeds. Accordingly, the Bible teacher John MacArthur writes:

Most contemporary discussions on assurance focus almost exclusively on the objective grounds for assurance [i.e. God promises salvation for those who believe]. They minimize or dismiss the subjective grounds [i.e. how can we know we believe], thus robbing an untold number of believers of a valuable source of assurance. Worse yet, in doing so they perpetuate the tragic phenomenon of false assurance. (*Saved Without a Doubt* [Cook, 2001], 15]

⁵ There are two vital but more complex topics that are touched on in this chapter but covered in more detail elsewhere in the *Christian Essentials*. First, a key to being certain you are forgiven forever and possess eternal life is knowing that you cannot lose your relationship with God. This is described by Christians as the “once saved, always saved” and is the view of these studies.

Secondly, the topic of recognizing and responding to false Christians is another vital but rather complex topic. Both of these are discussed further in study #3 *FAITH*, in the section entitled “Your Father’s Acceptance.”

Project 1.C

Make sure you are a Christian

2 Corinthians 13:5

Week 3**Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.** (2 Cor 13:5)

Do you claim to be a Christian? God's word clearly instructs you to evaluate your life to ensure this is true. Some claim that you cannot know for certain that you are a Christian. But as discussed in the previous chapter, God wants you to be sure (cf. 1 John 5:13). Also, if you cannot be certain you are a Christian, then why did the Apostle Paul tell us to: "*Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves*" (2 Cor 13:5). Or as it says in 2 Peter: "*Work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen*" (1:10). The Apostles believed you should do this, and could effectively do it as well.

How would you "*examine*" yourself and "*test*" your claim to be a Christian? The last few chapters of this study have given you the biblical answer. The table on the following pages is a summary of the biblical attributes of a real Christian. Carefully and prayerfully consider each one. Check the ones you can claim for your life and try to record an example of each one.

God wants two different things from this project. If you are not a Christian, this small "*test*" will reveal this to you so you can continue to seek God to become a real Christian. If you are a Christian, the "*test*" will strengthen your confidence in this.

A Self-test for Real Christian Faith

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	I have a new and/or lasting hatred for sin.
2 <input type="checkbox"/>	I have a new and/or lasting desire to please and obey God.

3 <input type="checkbox"/>	I feel my relationship with God is based on love rather than guilt or fear.
4 <input type="checkbox"/>	I have a new and/or lasting experience of the Spirit's love, joy, peace, and power, instead of having to force myself to do the right thing in my own will power.
5 <input type="checkbox"/>	I have a new and/or lasting desire to study and learn God's word in Scripture.
6 <input type="checkbox"/>	I have a new and/or lasting desire to generously give my money to God and His work.
7 <input type="checkbox"/>	I value pleasing God and serving people more than worldly success and pleasures.
8 <input type="checkbox"/>	I am committed to a local church and have a new and/or lasting desire to spend time with other Christians in church services and other times.

<p>9 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>I have a new and/or lasting desire to love, help, and serve other Christians.</p>
<p>10 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>I have a new and/or lasting desire and ability to forgive those who have hurt me.</p>
<p>11 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>I have a new and/or lasting desire and ability to love those who do not love me.</p>
<p>12 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>I have a new and/or lasting concern for those who do not know Christ.</p>
<p>13 <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>I feel like my character continues to improve and I am able to change sinful habits.</p>

Chapter 1.9

What is God's First Commandment for the Christian?

Acts 2:38

Week 4

► After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:

- 1) What is God's first commandment for the Christian?
- 2) What are the biblical purposes of baptism?
- 3) Who should be baptized?
- 4) What is the biblical method of baptism? Why is this?
- 5) What was most meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

As a young man Arun met a group of Christians. He was amazed by their love and character and soon became a Christian himself. At the time, Arun was living with his Hindu family. They were very disappointed in his conversion but accepted his desire to attend church services. However, one day Arun confessed to his family that he had been baptized. The next day he found his possessions on the front porch of his family's house and he was permanently shunned. There is something spiritual, and even supernatural about Christian baptism that even spiritual forces of evil recognize and may violently react to. Still, God commands all Christians to be baptized. The Bible says:

**Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God,
and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ
for the forgiveness of your sins. (Acts 2:38)**

God wants you to be baptized.

A) Why should you be baptized?

Baptism is the God-ordained practice of being immersed in water to demonstrate a person's trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior. This is why the Apostle Peter instructed the early Christians: "*Be baptized.*" And what he commanded these early Christians to do, God expects all Christians to do. This is why Jesus also commanded all Christians to be baptizing other Christians when He said:

I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:18-19)

This is why many NT texts assume all Christians are baptized (cf. Rom 6:2-4; Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:12; 1 Pet 3:21).

Finally, Jesus Himself was baptized in water as an example for all Christians to follow. The Bible says, “*Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John . . . Jesus said, ‘It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires’*” (Matt 3:13, 15). Water baptism is something “*God requires*” of all followers of Jesus Christ.

Which is why the Apostle Peter commanded new Christians: “*Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). Therefore, in some ways, baptism is God’s first commandment for a new Christian to obey. **God wants you to be baptized.**

God has several purposes for water baptism. First, it is a biblical means through which a person publicly professes their saving faith in Christ. Baptism is the outward expression of your inward commitment to Jesus as your Lord. The Bible says, “*baptism*” is “*a response to God from a clean conscience*” (1 Pet 3:21). It is a physical version of a “sinner’s prayer.”

It is common today for such a prayer to be the means through which someone professes their saving faith in Christ. But doing this through the act of water baptism has the advantage of better demonstrating the sincerity of someone’s faith. There are many people who pray a “sinner’s prayer” but do not become Christians. There are far fewer who sincerely submit to water baptism and then demonstrate later they were never a Christian. Water baptism is a more certain means than a “sinner’s prayer” for someone to become a Christian.

This is why water baptism and becoming a Christian are often mentioned together in the NT. For example, when the Apostle Peter is asked by a crowd what they should do to be forgiven forever he replied, “*Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38; cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21).

Of course, the act of baptism does not earn the forgiveness of your sins. As discussed throughout this study, “*Your rescue from God’s wrath is a gift from God and not a result of something you did so that no one can boast it depended on them.* (Eph 2:9 DEV 1).

This is why the Apostle Paul wrote: “*Christ didn’t send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News*” (1 Cor 1:17). You can be certain that Christ sent the Apostle to do everything necessary for the salvation of people. But Christ did not send the Apostle Paul to baptize people, because this is not required to have complete forgiveness forever through faith in Christ.

Accordingly, the Apostle wrote elsewhere: “*If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Rom 10:9). There is no mention here of baptism being required to be forgiven forever by God.

However, most NT scholars believe that such confessions as described in Romans 10:9 were made at the time of baptism in the early Church. This

is because God's purpose for water baptism is to be an outward expression of your inward commitment to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Water baptism is a biblical means through which one receives forever forgiveness.

Secondly, water baptism, like all of God's commands, are an opportunity to demonstrate our love and obedience to Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *"If you love me, obey my commandments"* (John 14:15). As a professing Christian you have claimed that Christ is your Lord. But if you refuse to be baptized, you have refused to do the first thing your Lord has commanded you to do. And your refusal to be baptized will diminish the value of whatever else you do for God.

Wouldn't this be true of a child with their parent? Imagine the child refuses to obey the first thing their parent tells them to do, but is willing to do other things. The parent would still rightly feel disrespected. And so does God with any Christian who refuses water baptism.

Accordingly, water baptism is also intended by God to prove you are a real Christian. You learned in the previous chapters of this study that loving and obeying God is essential to having any confidence your sins have been forgiven forever. The Bible says:

We can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. (1 John 2:3-5)

If you refuse to be baptized, you cannot claim to love God or to be a real Christian. This is why throughout the history of the Christian Church, a person was not considered a member of a local church, or eligible for the Lord's Supper, unless they had been baptized. Again, baptism does not save you. But baptism is among the first things God commands you to do in order prove to yourself and others that you are a real Christian.

Of course there may be many obstacles to baptism. Sometimes there is a spiritual battle in a new Christian's life that makes obeying this command a great struggle. In cultures that are hostile to Christianity, there may be fears about the consequences of being baptized. For example, some Christians have been rejected from their families for obeying God's command in this matter. In some countries, Christian water baptism is strongly opposed by the government. This makes it especially tragic when a Christian neglects baptism even though they live where there is no opposition to doing so. They should remember that there are Christians all over the world obeying God in baptism, but at great personal cost.

Regardless of the situation, God wants anyone claiming to be a Christian, to trust Him and be baptized to prove their love for Him. As the early Christians said: *"We must obey God rather than any human authority"* (Acts 5:29). From God's perspective, there is no excuse to disobey His command to be baptized.

Baptism does not earn you forever forgiveness from God. But it is a necessary proof that you have trusted Christ as your Savior and King and possess forever forgiveness. This is why the Apostle Peter commanded the early Christians: *“Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”* (Acts 2:38). **God wants you to be baptized.**

B) Who should be baptized?

The Bible makes it clear that water baptism is a voluntary act to express real saving faith in Christ. Therefore, it requires someone old enough to have such faith and make such a commitment. This is why there are no examples of babies being baptized in the Bible. Some good Christians baptize infants, but all baptisms described in Scripture involved people who were old enough to sincerely believe in Jesus. For example, we read: *“Those who believed what Peter said were baptized”* (Acts 2:41). Likewise, *“everyone in”* the *“household”* of the jailer in Philippi *“were immediately baptized . . . because they all believed in God”* (Acts 16:33-34).

God only wants real Christians to be baptized. Unfortunately, many Christians have gone through church programs such as “confirmation” and assumed they were Christians at that time and were baptized. However, later they realized their trust in Christ was not real, and they became a real Christian later in life. Those who were baptized before they became a Christian should be baptized again to express their true trust in Christ now.

The Bible says: *“Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”* (Acts 2:38). **God wants you to be baptized.**

C) How should you be baptized?

Christian baptism is immersing a believer in water. The word “baptism” comes from a Greek word (*baptō*) which means to dip, plunge, or immerse something in a liquid. ² Therefore, biblical descriptions of baptisms imply immersion. Jesus was *“baptized in the Jordan River”* and afterwards *“Jesus came up out of the water”* (Matt 3:6, 16). Likewise, when Phillip helped a man become a Christian, the Bible says, *“they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him”* (Acts 8:38). Christian baptism is described in the Bible as immersion in water.

Why does God want Christian baptism to be immersion in water? Because it symbolizes several important things about becoming a Christian. First, being under the water reflects how you were under the wrath of God before your trust in Christ. This is just like the people before the flood in Noah’s day (cf. Gen 6:17 with Rom 5:9). Water is a symbol of God’s wrath.

Secondly, immersion is a reminder that you were spiritually dead because of your unforgiven sins (cf. Eph 2:1). In fact, if you were left under the water you would die.

Thirdly, being immersed in the water symbolizes our being “*buried with Christ in baptism*” (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12) and dying to our old life and being completely identified and united with Him.

Fourth, being raised out of the water symbolizes your new life in Christ (cf. Rom 6:2-4; Col 2:12). Fifth, coming up out of the water also reflects your sins being washed away (cf. Acts 22:16; Tit 3:5). And finally, immersion in water also symbolizes being born again by the Spirit, just as you were physically immersed in your mother’s water sack in her womb (cf. John 3:3-8).

What are other biblical attributes of Christian baptism? First, many baptisms in the Bible were rather private affairs with only a few Christians witnessing it (cf. Acts 8:34-38; 9:17-18; 10:24-48; 16:13-15; 16:29-34). Accordingly, the Bible describes water baptism “*as a response to God from a clean conscience*” (1 Pet 3:21). It would seem the primary purpose of baptism is for God to see your act of love and obedience to Him, not necessarily other people. What is important is that God sees you baptized.

Therefore, a rather private baptism is biblical. This might make baptism easier for those living where the practice is opposed. However, if you are willing and able, your baptism can certainly be a great encouragement and witness to others and can be performed more publicly.

Also, any Christian friend can baptize you. The command of Jesus for all Christians is: “*go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*” (Matt 28:19). It does not need to be a Pastor or church leader who baptizes you. However, we have no biblical examples of someone baptizing themselves.

Thirdly, baptisms in the Bible occurred soon after the person trusted Christ. Again: “*Those who believed what Peter said were baptized*” (Acts 2:41). If you have trusted Christ to be your Savior and King, seek to be baptized as soon as possible. ³

The Bible says, “*Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). **God wants you to be baptized.**

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite 1 John 3:10 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize Acts 2:38 in the translation above or another.
- ▶ If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, then trust Him with getting baptized! Also, you may be able to help another Christian be baptized. In either case see Project 1.D on the following page.

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- ¹ (Eph 2:9 DEV)- “Rescue from God’s wrath” translates the Greek word *sesōsmenoi*, meaning “To rescue and preserve from danger or destruction” (BDAG). It is often translated as merely “saved,” but the Greek has the more complete and clear meaning of “being saved from danger.”
- ² The Greek root word from which the NT derives the word “baptism” is *baptō*. The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)* says that:
- In secular Greek *baptō* means (a) dip, (b) dip into a dye, and (c) draw water . . . In the LXX [Greek OT] *baptō* translates the OT Heb. *tabal*, “dip” . . . [In the NT] *baptō* only [has] the meaning “dip.” (1:144-5).
- Accordingly, the authoritative *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature (BDAG)* only gives one meaning for *baptō*: “to dip something in a liquid.”
- For example, *baptō* is used twice in John 13:26 (NIV):
- Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped [baptō] it in the dish.’ Then, dipping [baptas] the piece of bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.*
- Webster’s* defines “dip” as: “to plunge or immerse momentarily under the surface (as of a liquid).” It becomes obvious then that the root Greek word for baptism means to completely immerse or submerge something.
- ³ For a more detailed discussion of water baptism and biblical support for the contents of this chapter, see Kurt Jurgensmeier, “Water Baptism” chapter 18.1 in *Theological Papers*; online at: <https://trainingtimothys.org/books/book-18-theological-papers/>

Project 1.D

Be Baptized or Baptize Others

In the previous chapter (1.9) you studied what the Apostle Peter said to those who wanted forever forgiveness from God: *“Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”* (Acts 2:38). **God wants you to be baptized.** If you have trusted in Christ as your Savior and Lord and have not been baptized, you are encouraged to do so.

Also, you are encouraged to help other Christians be baptized. Jesus commanded all Christians: *“Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”* (Matt 28:19). Perhaps you know someone who claims to be a Christian but has not been baptized. Go through this study with them to help ensure they are a Christian. Then discuss chapter 1.9 on baptism. If they agree to be baptized, perhaps you can have the great privilege of baptizing them!

Here are some practical steps for water baptism:

- 1) Decide which Christian will baptize you. Perhaps it will be the one who led you through this *FORGIVENESS* study to believe in Christ.
- 2) Find a safe place to be immersed. Most churches have a place for this. Otherwise, a pond, river, or even a bathtub in a home will work.
- 3) Wear clothes that will remain modest after being immersed.
- 4) At the baptism, your baptizer should ask you a few questions to help you publicly confess your faith in Christ. For example:
 - Baptizer: “What must you believe about yourself to be a Christian?”
 - Answer: “I have broken God’s laws and deserve His punishment.”
 - Baptizer: “What must you believe about Christ to be a Christian?”
 - Answer: “He died for my sins, taking God’s punishment for me.”
 - Baptizer: “Why do you want to be baptized today?”
 - Answer: “To demonstrate my faith in Christ as my Lord and Savior.”
- 5) At this point, the baptizer should say: “Because you have confessed your faith in Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (cf. Matt 28:19).
- 6) Then the baptizer should carefully and completely dunk you in the water and help you come up out of the water.
- 7) The baptizer should lead a prayer for your new Christian life.

Chapter 1.10

What are Important Commitments for My Spiritual Growth?

Acts 2:42, 47

Week 4

- After reading this chapter, answer the following questions:
- 1) What are at least five practices God wants you to commit to?
 - 2) Why is it important to find and join a local church?
 - 3) What is the most important quality of a church to look for? Why?
 - 4) What was most meaningful to you in this chapter? Why?

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles we read: “*Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day--about 3,000 in all*” (Acts 2:41). And the Bible goes on to tell us what these new Christians committed themselves to:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42, 47)

God wants you to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

The first Christians are an example to you of what God wants you to be committed to. After the first Christians were baptized, the early Church historian Luke records that “*all the believers devoted themselves*” to five things. These commitments were 1) listening to and following “*the apostles' teaching*”; 2) “*fellowship*”; 3) “*sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper)*”; 4) “*prayer*”; and 5) sharing the good news about Jesus with non-Christians through which, “*the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*”

These commitments can seem overwhelming at first, and they will require some effort. But a real Christian has been indwelt with the Holy Spirit and will greatly desire to do these very things. And God does not want you to do them alone, but together with Christian friends in a local church.

The Bible says, “*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.* (Acts 2:42, 47). God your Father wants you

to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

A) God wants you committed to learning & obeying the Bible

First, the early Christians “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.*” That teaching is recorded in the New Testament (NT). If you do not own a Bible, you need to purchase one. For those who understand English, we recommend the *New Living Translation* used in this study. It even comes in a version designed for new believers. ¹

We would also suggest you read the New Testament before reading the Old Testament (OT). It applies more to the Christian’s life. However, you will find the Psalms and Proverbs in the OT very helpful as well.

You should read the Bible every day. As you do, you will experience God speaking to you through His written words. And you will notice significant spiritual growth. As you read the Bible, write down questions you can ask a Christian friend or a Pastor.

Do not simply read the Bible. When you encounter commands for the Christian, do your best to immediately apply them to your life. The Bible says, “*Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves*” (James 1:22). When the first Christians “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,*” they were not just devoted to listening to the Apostles’ teaching, but obeying it as well. ²

The Bible says, “*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.* (Acts 2:42, 47). God your Father wants you to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

B) God wants you committed to Christian friendships

Secondly, the first Christians “*devoted themselves . . . to fellowship.*” The original Greek word used here is *koinōnia*. It means to share your life with others. This same Bible passage goes on to describe what fellowship means. The first Christians “*met in homes . . . and shared their meals with great joy and generosity.*” In fact, they “*shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need*” (Acts 2:44-45). That’s sharing your life!

There is no doubt that the first Christians considered one another their best, closest, and most trusted friends. And FRIENDSHIP is the best one-word definition of biblical fellowship.

There are over 50 “one another” commands in the NT telling Christians to love one another, accept one another, encourage one another, serve one another, teach and counsel one another, and meet with one another. Why is this? Because your greatest purpose as a Christian is to glorify God by

enjoying His love for you and giving His love to others. And you will learn and give love the best in Christian fellowship.

When you become a Christian you get a new Father in Heaven. You also get a new family on Earth. This is why throughout the NT Christians are called brothers and sisters. Your Father wants you to love, serve, accept, and encourage other Christians as if they are your beloved siblings.

The Bible says, *“All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42, 47).* God your Father wants you to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

C) God wants you committed to the Lord’s Supper

Thirdly, the first Christians *“devoted themselves . . . to the Lord’s Supper.”* This refers to an informal ceremony Jesus instituted for you to remember what He did for you on the cross. The Bible says:

As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, “Take this and eat it, for this is my body.”

And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said, “Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many. (Matt 26:26-28)

Jesus wants you to frequently participate in this ceremony involving the symbols of the body and blood of Christ in order to celebrate His sacrifice to pay for your sins.

D) God wants you committed to praise and prayer

Fourth, the first Christians *“devoted themselves . . . to prayer”* and were *“praising God.”* Prayer is simply talking to God. As a Christian, you now have the amazing privilege of being able to talk to God anytime you want, and about anything you want. The Bible says:

Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

We see that there are two types of prayer. First, praising your Father for who He is and what He has done for you. Secondly, asking Him to help

you. Both are very important and help you to trust God with your difficulties and have a God-centered perspective in your life. ³

E) God wants you committed to sharing the good news about Jesus to non-Christians

Fifth, the first Christians were telling others the Good News about forgiveness through trust in Christ. It was through this practice that *“the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.”*

A few chapters later in the Book of Acts we read: *“The believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went”* (8:4). There are few privileges and pleasures greater than being used by God to help someone become a Christian and receive eternal life. Practical steps and instruction on sharing the Good News about Jesus was provided in Project 1.B of this study.

The Bible says, *“All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42, 47).* God your Father wants you to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

F) How can you keep these commitments?

The early Christians, *“worshiped together at the Temple each day”* and *“met in homes”* regularly (Acts 2:46). The large gathering at the temple soon became a Sunday church service in the early Church. And as Christianity spread, the early Christians started local churches led by godly Pastors.

Being devoted to the above Christian practices is a challenging commitment. But again, your Father does not expect you to do them alone. This is why He wants to give you a local church to be help you with your Christian life.

The first believers were devoted to hearing the Apostles teach the Bible. Today, God provides Pastors in the local church for the same purpose. God never intended for you to learn His word alone. The Bible says:

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not

be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. (Eph 4:11-13)

Why did the Lord give “*pastors and teachers*” to the local church? To help you grow spiritually. Their ministries “*build up*” people in “*the church*” and will help you serve God and “*be mature in the Lord.*” They will also protect you from harmful false teachings about the Bible.

As pointed out in the following Project (1.E “Choosing a Church”), the most important attribute of a church is the character of its leaders. You are looking for men who will earn your trust and respect. This is because God wants you to follow and serve them. The Bible says:

Trust your spiritual leaders because they have earned it. Yield to them because they carefully guard and care for your souls. They will give an account to God for how well they do this. Follow and support your leaders so that you give them joy instead of grief. To grieve your Pastors will not benefit you. (Heb 13:17 DEV ⁴)

Therefore, it is vital for your Christian life that you find and join a loving and biblical local church with mature and godly leaders.

Finally, it was described above that God wants you to be committed to sharing your life with others and having close Christian friends. This will probably not happen by just going to church every Sunday. You need to be committed to a small group in your church in order to experience the friendships, fellowship, and family God wants you to. ⁵

The Bible says, “*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.* (Acts 2:42, 47). God your Father wants you to be committed to 5 practices and a local church to help you grow as a Christian.

- ▶ Return to the beginning of this chapter and answer the questions there.
- ▶ Recite Acts 2:38 from memory.
- ▶ Memorize Acts 2:42, 47 in the translation above or another.
- ▶ Meet this week with your group to discuss chapters 1.9-1.10 of this study.
- ▶ If you are not currently a member of a local church, complete Project 1.E: “Choosing a Church.”
- ▶ Complete Project 1.F: “Planning & Pursuing My Christian Commitments” before meeting with your small group.

¹ The *New Believer’s Bible* in the *New Living Translation* is highly recommended and can be found online at:

https://www.amazon.com/New-Believers-Bible-NLT-Tyndale/dp/1414302541/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1525364423&sr=1-1&keywords=nlt+new+believer%27s+bible.

- ² For more instruction on how to be spiritually strengthened by the Bible see chapter 2.9 in *Christian Essentials* study #2: *FOUNDATIONS*.
- ³ For more instruction on praising God see chapter 2.7 in *Christian Essentials* study #2: *FOUNDATIONS*. For more instruction on prayer see chapter 2.8 and 2.10 in the same study.
- ⁴ (Heb 13:17 DEV)- “Trust . . . because they have earned it” translates the Greek word *peithesthe* which comes from the verb *peithō* meaning: “to be so convinced that one puts trust in something; be persuaded” (BDAG #2). *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* defines *peithō* as: “to cause a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations” (p. 469). (cf. Matt 27:20; 28:14; Acts 13:43; 19:8; Rom 8:38; 14:14; Phil 1:6; 1 John 3:19;). Elsewhere in Hebrews itself it has the meaning of “convinced” (6:9). Accordingly, the NIV translates Hebrews 13:17 as “have confidence in your leaders.”

The typical translation of simply “obey” (NASB, NLT, NET, ESV, KJV) is misleading. The idea of “follow” or “yield” is reflected in some uses of the word (cf. Acts 5:38; 23:21; Rom 2:8; Gal 5:7; James 3:3). But it should be noticed that if the author primarily intended the meaning of “obey” there were several other Greek words he could have used to convey this more clearly (cf. *tereō* “keep” Matt 19:17; *peitharcheō* “obey” Acts 5:29). This is precisely what the author of Hebrews does when he uses another word for “obey” (*hypakous*) instead of *peithō* in Hebrews 5:9 because he intends the meaning of “obey.”

Peithō at times includes the idea of following someone’s authority. But it does not mean an absolute obedience. *Peithō* in Hebrews 13:17 means an earned trust from persuasion, not an unqualified submission because of the person’s position.

God expects the Christian to be persuaded by the character, knowledge, and wisdom of their spiritual leaders before they trust and follow them. This is why there are extensive lists of their character qualifications in the NT (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9). Spiritual leaders have a responsibility to earn and maintain the trust of those following them and the Greek word *peithō* communicates this even if most English translations do not.

Unfortunately, the idea of authoritarian church leadership or unqualified submission is suggested by many NT commentators. For example, John MacArthur writes regarding Hebrews 13:17, “The command is unqualified. Obey your leaders and submit to them” (*MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews* [Moody, 1997], 445). The author uncharacteristically ignores the meaning of the Greek here.

“Yield” translates the Greek word *hypeikete*; “to yield to someone’s authority” (BDAG). It is used only here in the NT. It would seem significant that the author of Hebrews did not use the common Greek word for submission (*hypotassō*) in the context of spiritual leaders. This may be because the latter suggests a stronger form of submission than the word used in Hebrews 13:17.

Evidence for this is the fact that a few verses earlier the same author did use the common word for submission (*hypotassō*) when he wrote that we should “submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits” (Heb 12:9). It seems that the author believed there is a difference between how we are to view the authority of God compared to the authority of church leaders.

All of these points are supported by the fact that submission to other God-

ordained authorities in life is repeatedly described as including “*everything*.” For example, Scriptures say, “*As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything*” (Eph 5:24); “*Children, obey your parents in everything*” (Col 3:20 NIV); and “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything you do*” (Col 3:22). The intentional and relatively rare omission of the word “*everything*” in the context of submission to church authorities again suggests that pastoral authority is to be more earned and voluntary than these other spheres of God-ordained authority.

Finally, all of this is also supported by Peter’s admonition to church leaders: “*Don’t lord it over [katakryieouontes] the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example*” (1 Pet 5:3). The Greek word here means: “to bring into subjection, become master, gain dominion over, subdue” (BDAG). Again, the authority of a Pastor is described as coming from the persuasion of their “*example*,” not the mere power of their position.

“*Carefully guard and care for*” translated the Greek *agrypnousin* meaning “to be vigilant in awareness of threatening peril, to be alertly concerned about, look after, care for” (BDAG #1, #2).

“*Follow and support*” reflects the context of yielding to and following your spiritual leaders. The writer is saying that Christians have a responsibility to respond to the care of their Pastors so that their work gives them joy and not grief. Cf. NIV “*let their work be a joy*”; NLT “*Give them reason to do this with joy*.” NT scholar F.F. Bruce writes: “The readers are invited to cooperate with their leaders” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans, 1990], 385)

⁵ For more instruction on Christian fellowship in small groups see chapter 2.6 in *Christian Essentials* study #2: FOUNDATIONS.

Project 1.E

Choosing a Church**Week 4**

If you are a Christian, God wants you to belong to a church family. If you are not currently a member of a local church, it is important that you find and join one. If there are several options in your area, then an important question is how do you choose a church?

One of the most important things is whether or not you have friends in a church. It will be easier to join a church where you already have friends.

But in the long term there is another attribute that is even more important to look for in a church. The most important attribute of a church is not its size or location or even what programs they offer. What matters to God is the teaching and character of the Pastors. These are the things that will affect the character of a local church more than anything else. A church will be a reflection of its leaders.

This is why the Bible gives a list of qualifications for Pastors which the Bible also calls elders:

An elder must live a blameless life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don't have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. A church leader is a manager of God's household, so he must live a blameless life.

He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money. Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life.

He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong. (Titus 1:6-9; cf. 1 Tim 3:1-12)

These are the kind of men you are looking for to be your Pastors. Perhaps more than anything else, what kind of Pastor(s) you have will affect how well you grow as a Christian

All of this is why you should personally know your Pastor(s). The Apostle Paul told his friend Timothy: *"You must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you"* (2 Tim 3:13-14). Do *"you know you can trust those who"* are teaching you? That is very important, and perhaps the most important thing to consider when choosing to join a local church.

How can you know the character of your Pastor(s)? First by their teaching. The qualifications above say *"he will be able to encourage*

[*parakaleō*] *others with wholesome teaching*” (Tit 1:9). God wants a Pastor’s teaching to “*encourage*” you. The Greek word translated here is a rich word. It can mean to urge and appeal strongly to someone and “to instill someone with courage or cheer, comfort, encourage, cheer up . . . treat someone in an inviting manner, or speak to in a friendly manner.”¹

God wants a Pastor’s teaching to be friendly and to encourage, comfort, and even cheer you up. God does not want Pastors to be harsh and demanding. The Bible tells Pastors, “*Don’t lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example*” (1 Pet 5:3). Jesus rebuked religious teachers when He told them, “*You weigh men down with burdens hard to bear*” (Luke 11:46 NASB). Good Pastors will remind you of God’s grace, instead of trying to motivate you with guilt and fear.

Secondly, Jesus said you can know a person’s character, “*By their fruit . . . Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. . . Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them*” (Matt 7:16-17, 20). It was noted above that a local church will reflect the character of its leaders. A good and godly Pastor will produce a good and godly church. The kind of people in a church will indicate what kind of Pastor they have. If the people are loving and godly, then this is good evidence that the leaders are loving and godly. As Jesus said, “*the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher*” (Luke 6:40). Accordingly, the Bible says, “*Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith*” (Heb 13:7). A good Pastor will have much spiritual “*good . . . come from their lives.*”

Related to this will be the Pastor’s family. The qualifications above stated: “*He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don’t have a reputation for being wild or rebellious*” (Tit 1:6). The character of a Pastor’s family is one of the best indications of their character. No one knows them better than their wife and children. They are his foremost disciples in the faith. If a Pastor’s family is godly and loving then this probably means the Pastor is the same.

Finally, a good Pastor will be willing to let you know him. The qualification above state that God requires that a good Pastor, “*enjoy having guests in his home*” (Tit 1:8). One reason God wants a Pastor to have people in his home is so they can better know his character. If a Pastor offers such an invitation take advantage of it. God wants His sheep to know their shepherd.

Choosing a local church will be one of the most important decisions in your life. Choose wisely and carefully, knowing that the character of the leaders will affect the character of the church more than anything else.

¹ BDAG.

Project 1.F

Planning & Pursuing My Christian Commitments

You have learned many things in the *FORGIVENESS* study. The most important is how to obtain forgiveness forever from God through trusting in Jesus Christ. As described in the last chapter (1.10), there are now some commitments God wants you to make that will bless your life and demonstrate you are a real Christian.

We would encourage you to complete the questions and tasks below in order to evaluate your next steps as a Christian. All of these commitments can seem like a lot at first. But every one of them will be a great blessing to your life and you have Christian friends who will help you. Please check off the commitments you have made, or record your plan for completing them. Then meet with a Pastor in your local church to discuss them.

Name:

Date:

√	My Commitments	Notes/Plans
	I will be baptized as a believer in Jesus Christ.	Where & when will you do this?
	I will commit to attending weekly Sunday services in a local church.	Where & when will you do this?
	I will commit to joining a small group of Christians to serve them and learn from them.	When & with who will you do this?
	I will commit to reading a portion of the NT every day. & praying over.	Where & when will you do this?
	I will commit to praising God and praying to Him every day.	Where & when will you do this?
	I will meet with a Pastor in my church to get to know them and let them know me.	When and with who will you do this?
	I will commit to praying for family and friends who do not believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.	Please list some people you would like to start praying for:

Appendix 1.A

Memory Verses for FORGIVENESS Study

All verses are in the translation used in this study.

Reference	Verse
1 Peter 3:18	<i>Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God.</i>
John 14:6	<i>I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.</i>
John 3:16, 18	<i>God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. . . . But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.</i>
Rom 3:23	<i>Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.</i>
Rom 3:20	<i>No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.</i>
Rom 3:22	<i>We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.</i>
1 John 5:13	<i>I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.</i>
1 John 4:13	<i>God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us.</i>
1 John 3:10	<i>Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God.</i>
Acts 2:38	<i>Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins.</i>
Acts 2:42, 47	<i>All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals</i>

	<p><i>(including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. . . And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved</i></p>
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