

# So You Want To Follow Jesus?

Maybe you've been thinking you want to follow Jesus and become a Christian, but just aren't sure how to take that step. You *think* you might know what it means *to follow Jesus*, but it'd be good to get some clarity and direction – *what's next?*

Or maybe you've never thought about following Jesus...until now. But something has got you interested, you don't know what exactly, but you want to know – who is this Jesus person your Christian friends at school or uni call 'Lord and Christ'? What does *that* – *Lord and Christ* – even mean?

## separated by sin

In my previous article '[A guide for LGBTQ Christian teens](#)', I talked about how much God loves each one of us. He loved the world so much that 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' ([Romans 5:8](#)). You could be thinking, '*sure, that's nice, but what does it mean 'sinners'? I haven't done anything wrong*'.

Sin is not necessarily a hot button topic in our world today. You're more likely to be encouraged to '*live your truth*' than told '*you are a sinner in need of forgiveness*'. If we do stop to think about sin, we probably tend to view it as *really bad things*, like *murder* or *hating on someone* or *lying*. Most of us would probably think of ourselves as *pretty good people*, but the truth is, when compared alongside a completely holy God, we all fall far short of His standard of 'good'.

Sin is not just about specific actions; it also refers to a broken relationship with God and a tendency to stray from His holiness. The reality is that you are separated from God because of your sin, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem.

The Bible describes our situation as being like slaves.

Although humans were created to rule over this world and all the creatures that live in it wisely and well, as God's image-bearers, we gave that up in the Garden of Eden to give our allegiance to someone other than God. We allowed ourselves to be mastered by sin and so became its slaves (2 Peter 2:19).

No doubt this resonates with your own life experiences. Even when you've wanted to do the right thing or tell the truth, we often don't make the right choice in the moment. You've probably done things or made decisions that you now regret but it seemed impossible at the time to choose differently.

But the good news is that God didn't want to leave humanity in a state of brokenness and separation from him. He wanted to fix up the issue of sin, to make a way for us to be forgiven for our mistakes, and to show us the way to live in right relationship with Him.

He sent Jesus to save us, to redirect our lives towards His good and abundant way of living, and to help us see that our true reality, who we *really are*, is *one beloved of God*, intended for glory and greatness.

## **Lord + Christ**

God sent His Son Jesus into the world "not to condemn its people but to save them! Everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die." (John 3:16-17, CEV).

Being saved involves *having faith* in Jesus. So the logical next question is, *who is Jesus?* Who *is* this person that I would put my faith in him? What does it even mean to *put my faith in Jesus?* Great questions!

The best place to start\* to learn about who Jesus was is in the New Testament with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The gospels provide an account of the life, teachings, death,

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are foundational texts for understanding His ministry and message. In them, you'll read many amazing stories of what Jesus did, the miracles he performed, who he said he was, the reason why he came, and, finally, the almost unbelievable account of his resurrection from the dead, which validated Jesus' divine identity and his claim to be the Son of God.

The gospel of John comments that *"these [things about Jesus] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

***(If you haven't read the gospels for yourself, why not take some time over the next few weeks to read through what they say about Jesus...)***

The book of Romans, written by the Apostle Paul, says that "this is the very message about faith we preach: If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

He's telling us that *having faith in Jesus* means believing that Jesus is the one that God sent to save us from our sins (*Christ* or *Messiah*, means 'anointed one' (Isaiah 61:1), that Jesus is Lord and therefore has rightful authority over our life, and that he really is the Son of God, as proven by his resurrection from the dead.

The gospels therefore offer both an invitation and a challenge. Do you accept that you need forgiveness, that you are separated from being in right relationship with God? Do you believe Jesus is the one sent into the world to offer that forgiveness and restore you to God? Do you believe that his claim to be the Son of God is true and that he really did rise again from the dead? Do you believe he is Lord of all, just as capable now, as then, of commanding the winds and waves, and will you trust him with the direction of your life?

If the answer is yes to all of these, then *this* is what it means to follow Jesus! This is what it means to be a Christian.

## **disciples not decisions**

Every Christian's life starts at a certain point, with a decision, but that one decision alone is not enough. Following Jesus is a life marked by *discipleship*, which is really just the process of learning to be like Jesus more and more each day. That's a topic I intend to talk more about in a later article.

But following Jesus *does* start with *having faith*: confessing that Jesus is Lord, and believing that God raised him from the dead.

So if this is you, if you find yourself fully convinced about who Jesus is and what he came to do, and that he truly was the Son of God, whom God raised to life again, the Bible says that as soon as you realise this, you should declare your faith publicly by being *baptised* – fully immersed in water.

Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based *on their faith* in the work of Jesus Christ. I'll be talking a bit more about that in my next article in this series (Letters To My Kids) so look out for that soon, but if you'd like to chat about baptism in the meantime, I'd love to hear from you!

Let me know your thoughts on this topic (you can message me publicly or privately here or on my socials), or any questions you'd like answers to on this topic (or anything else) in upcoming articles!

*“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” – Acts 22:16*

\* the gospels aren't the only place we read about Jesus. Both the Old Testament and New Testament have a great deal to say about Jesus and who he was! In fact, the promise of Jesus is found in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. [Here are 55 Old Testament prophecies](#) about Jesus, covering his birth, ministry, death and resurrection, and role in the church.

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## **In Him Was Life**

New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege, not a heavy burden and duty.

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## **Keeping The Faith**

The question isn't "do you truly believe" but, "who do you trust"?

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## **Without The Applause: Examining Celebrity Culture In The Church**

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I recently wrote an article which I called '[Beneath The Skin](#)'; a critique of sorts of modern Christianity and the Western church.

The article focused primarily on the collective Christian identity; *The Church*, not on any one particular denomination or way of 'doing church' but, rather, on the church's influence and presence, as a whole, in the world today. I endeavored to identify both *the good* and *the bad*, historically and now, but, in particular, I was looking for an answer to a specific question: what was beneath the skin of the modern, Western church?

Was there still a heart beating for Jesus, a life still given in allegiance to the king?

Was the church still the 'woman of valour' for whom Jesus died, shining brightly in a darkened and impoverished world through her most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ?

Or had she exchanged her birthright for a mess of pottage, trading persecution for privilege, and skeptical dismissal for a platform of popularity?

In this article, I want to dig a little deeper, to take a closer look at one of the issues I think played a part in asking this question. I want to examine the phenomenon of *celebrity culture* within the modern Western church and, in particular, the influence this culture has had on the average, ordinary Christian.

## **Social Reach**

With the rise of social media and the massive reach of online platforms, there's no doubt that the ability of the Christian faith to be expressed and shared has increased exponentially. The ability to virtually connect, through live streaming or recorded services, was demonstrated to be invaluable in more

recent times when many churches worldwide were forced to close their physical doors during the COVID-19 crisis. For many people, this was the only way they were able to still 'go to church' and connect with their faith community through long periods of isolation and disconnection.

Many faith communities now count in their membership those who may only attend church virtually (for a variety of reasons) and the reach of these various faith communities, in terms of missions and evangelism, goes well beyond their actual geographic borders.

It seems hard to believe, but the means that makes this even possible – the internet – is only just over 30 years old. Although an electronic information network of sorts already existed prior to the early 80s, it was almost entirely text-based and difficult to use and barely resembled the online network that we recognise today.

*"Almost everything which you needed to know in your daily life was written down somewhere,"* Berners-Lee [creator of the World Wide Web], told NPR's *Fresh Air* in 1996. *"And at the time, in the 1980s, it was almost certainly written down on a computer somewhere. It was very frustrating that people's effort in typing it in was not being used when, in fact, if it could only be tied together and made accessible, everything would be so much easier for everybody."*

In April 1993, everything changed forever. The World Wide Web was launched into the public domain, becoming the first royalty-free, easy-to-use means of browsing the emerging information network that developed into the Internet as we know it today. It's estimated that there are now 5.19 billion internet users (of a total world population of 8.1 billion people (as at August 2023)). The total number of internet users around the world has grown by 105 million during the past 12 months alone.

In the three decades since the web went public, the way in which we communicate, how information is shared, and how we connect has changed completely. The internet has expanded the reach of many valuable causes and community endeavours, but it has also increased the level of propaganda and disinformation, as well as challenging our standards of privacy and security.

For Christianity, this level of connectivity is somewhat of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers the opportunity for preaching, mission activities, and the expression of faith to be shared on a global scale in a time-effective manner. But, particularly for the individual, it also offers the alluring possibility of a global stage, with the ability to curate a popular (but often artificial) public persona, within the reach of millions through a simple tap of the keyboard. Anyone can become *someone*, with something to say and an audience to hear it.

Obscurity, mediocrity, and martyrdom have been replaced by an unnatural emphasis on personas, platforms, and profits. The era of 'Celebrity Christianity' is well and truly upon us.

## **A Toxic Culture Of Self**

Don't get me wrong. I love the internet and social media as much as the next person. I believe huge value can be added to the church; to our various ministries, and to the lives of regular, ordinary Christians through collaborating together in this form of information exchange. Social media and the internet are phenomenal tools for sharing the gospel, enabling churches to be more discoverable in their local area, and for sharing resources with a wider audience than only in-person services would allow. This kind of exposure may make a church or an individual Christian *well-known*, however, but not necessarily result in *celebrity* status.

Celebrity, unlike fame, is another animal altogether. While celebrity can't exist without fame – broad public recognition,



it goes beyond mere recognition alone, devolving into intense public interest, attention, and, frequently, adulation. This *cult of personality*, particularly when related to individuals, often focuses entirely on what is perceived or promoted, not necessarily what is real, with the idolising of an individual creating a level of adoration beyond what is natural or healthy.

Celebrity Christianity turns an individual into a brand, encourages the promotion of self, necessitates the ongoing careful curation of a popular public image, irrespective of whether it is authentic, and runs the risk of reducing the gospel to merely a vehicle for global Christian consumerism.

Within Celebrity Christianity, ministries, churches, and people's faith are often orientated around a central, charismatic figure who wields immense social influence and power, but whose platform is devoid of personal proximity or systems of accountability.

Writer and editor Katelyn Beaty, in her book *Celebrities for Jesus*, makes the distinction between *fame*, a morally neutral state of being known by more people than you know, and *celebrity*, with its focus on self-promotion and brand-building. "The right kind of fame," she writes, "arises from a life well lived, not a brand well cultivated."

We're all, of course, aware of the rise and fall of many well-known celebrity pastors and preachers, who got about in their fancy cars, wearing trendy outfits, with their slick media team and an entourage of understudies. Celebrated and acclaimed while they were in public favour, they quickly became the focus of criticism and derision, by Christians and the secular world alike, when their true private lives became known and their moral failures and abuses were exposed.

Yet they are not alone in their blame. To some degree, we are all complicit in allowing this toxic celebrity culture to

grow, unchecked, within the Church. We gave them their platform, we encouraged their rise to Christian stardom, and we promoted *their kind of Christianity* as somehow superior and more praiseworthy. And, by *their kind of Christianity* I mean, with our platform-centric churches and our consumer-driven services, we have not-so-subtly sent the message that anything worth saying must be said from a stage and that the ordinary faithfulness of regular Christians is, well, a little boring and not particularly noteworthy.

At its core, celebrity Christianity is about *pseudo-love* or *the feeling of love* that we get from Christian celebrities and which they, in turn, get from us. This degree of people worship is a disturbing tell, betraying the reality that we are, in many ways, a deeply narcissistic society, obsessed with and in love with self, more attracted to personality than character, more inspired by charisma than moral courage.

We have turned people into gods, worshipping the created rather than the Creator, looking to humans to satisfy us, rather than turning to the One in whom we live and move and have our very being.

We all “feed celebrity by turning to famous people to meet our own social and emotional needs,” Katelyn Beaty comments.

## **Things We've Lost Under The Glare Of The Stage Lights**

With our eyes blinded by the bright lights of celebrity, perhaps we've forgotten some of the foundational truths of the Christian life; spiritual disciplines that faithful Christians have endeavoured to live out for centuries.

### **The call to ordinary faithfulness**

Fame doesn't necessarily come at the expense of faithfulness. Jesus, of course, was and still is one of the most famous men

on the planet and yet would also be the supreme example of trust and confidence in God. But, by and large, the Christian life is not about notoriety but about quiet humility; taking up our cross daily, dying to self, and following Jesus wherever he leads.

This kind of faith rarely looks glamorous and is unlikely to make the daily news. More often than not, it goes largely unnoticed by all but One.

Maybe it's simply holding down two jobs in order to provide for your family and meet your financial responsibilities. Perhaps it's committing to authenticity and honesty in your relationships; business, friendship, community, church, romantic, and parental, choosing to make God at the heart and centre of your interactions. Maybe it's continuing to trust God, even through challenging and difficult circumstances like job loss, ill health, or relationship troubles. Maybe it's volunteering in service in your local church in steady and joyful commitment. Maybe it's doing the right thing, even (or perhaps especially) when no one is looking. At all times it is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, *a long obedience in the same direction*; committed discipleship through worship, service, joy, work, happiness, humility, community, and blessing.

This is the kind of ordinary faithfulness that is, in fact, extraordinary; a Jesus-saturated culture that takes root and thrives in the lives of ordinary people, and which replicates in the lives of all those who come into contact with them.

## **The relevance of the local church**

This *long obedience in the same direction* – discipleship – is outworked primarily as part of a local church. As Jonathan Leeman puts it, *'the local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God's people and see an authentic painting of Christ's love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long*

*journey of the Christian life."*

Yet so many Christians only think of church as something they go to rather than something they identify as. They may describe themselves as Christian in a general sense, but feel no real connection to or fail to see the relevance of the local church and their participation in it.

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about the connection between the individual and the church. He comments in the book of Corinthians that "God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it". This body of believers is governed or directed in all its functions by the head, who is Jesus. Through Christ's work on the cross, Christians have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. But they only become these things collectively, never individually. The moment an individual *becomes* a Christian is the moment they *stop being merely* an individual Christian.

As author Rachel Held Evans comments, "*Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. Try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.*"

The relevance and significance of being part of a Christian community can not be overstated, yet global connection has, in many ways, increased local disconnection to the heart and soul of Christian life.

More important than which online pastors we follow, what podcasts we listen to, or what Christian books we buy, is the essential reality that every Christian needs to belong to a gospel-centred local church (if this is geographically possible, of course).

It's only by being part of the local church that we can participate in and contribute to the collective Christian

activities that have marked the church as unique throughout the centuries; those of 'worship', 'fellowship', 'discipleship', ministry', and 'evangelism'.

## **The priesthood of every believer**

Under the old covenant made with the people of Israel, only one priest from a particular priestly family or class could enter into the Holy Place, approach the glory of God, and mediate between God and humanity as a representative of all the people.

All that changed because of Jesus. Through his reconciling work, the new covenant was instituted, where both Jew and Gentile could become part of God's family, where all people could draw near and find forgiveness and restoration of their relationship with God. The mediating work has been done, once, and for all time by the greatest of all priests, Jesus himself. Because believers become part of Jesus' body, part of the living temple of God, each one of us becomes an ambassador of this great ministry of reconciliation, people of the kingdom, collectively, a 'holy nation', in essence, a *priesthood of every believer* (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9)

The church is not some kind of class system or hierarchy, where only some minister and others merely watch on as spectators, but a collective organic reality, a *kingdom of priests*, in which *every person* witnesses and ministers, loves and serves alongside one another, as God has gifted them, for the good of the whole and the glory of His name.

There is more for each one of us to step into, and not merely as passive participants, but as active ambassadors in God's great story of reconciliation, members of the priesthood of every believer. Don't let celebrity culture tell you that you need a platform or notoriety or global influence in order to minister. You don't. You already know more than you need to know in order to do what you need to do. Simply make a start

and get active in your church.

## **The sufficiency of Jesus**

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour. For God, who said, ““Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

When we allow this truth to shine out of us, authentically and unvarnished, we discover, perhaps to our surprise, that Jesus is more than sufficient. His life-giving work on the cross, his selfless example of a life well lived, and his declaration of the sovereignty of God is more than powerful enough to transform the hardest of hearts. He doesn't need the lights, the cameras, the noise, the fancy clothes, the clever remarks, witty arguments, or public protestations of fervour.

He doesn't need any of it to impact a person's heart, to call them to himself, to transform and redeem them.

But the knowledge of this grace, of life-giving light, has been entrusted to us as a treasure shining out of rough jars of clay. It's our responsibility and our privilege to let this light – *his light* – shine brightly, to point the world to him, and to believe in his sufficiency and power to save.

Anything we do, if it has any power at all, is only because it flows from a life saturated in God, Who is love itself, and empowered by His life-giving spirit,

Celebrity culture tells us we need to be more. Scripture tells us that God's power is made perfect in our weakness and that in that weakness, the sufficiency of Jesus is still more than enough.

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# The Holy Spirit | This Same Power

*“If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” | Romans 8:11, ESV*

*“...This is my [Paul’s] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that **inner illumination of the Spirit** which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how **tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God**. That power is **the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead** and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips*

The Spirit has been intricately linked with humanity’s story, from the very beginning. It was God’s Spirit that brought the world into being (Genesis 1:2). It was God’s Spirit that empowered men and women in both the Old and New Testament times to prophesy, decipher dreams, possess extraordinary talent and knowledge, and undertake great feats of courage and action (Genesis 40:8, 41:38, Exodus 31:1-6, Judges 3:10, Judges 6:34, Luke 2:25-26, Luke 2:36-38). It was God’s Spirit that sparked conception in Mary’s womb, bringing about the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30-37). Jesus’ veracity as God’s Son and the revelation that he was sent ‘to take away the sin

of the world' were both affirmed by the Spirit (John 1:29-34). And it was the Spirit of God that [raised Jesus from the dead](#) (Mark 16:9, Romans 8:11).

This same Spirit, the Apostle Paul assures us, dwells in all those who have [surrendered to Jesus](#) as their King and Saviour, empowering and transforming their lives too (Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:18-21).

Our story, when we choose to become Christian believers, echos the incredible story of creation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the very beginning. The story of creation is our first glimpse into a story that is retold throughout the Bible; that of bringing life and light out of darkness, through the action of God's Spirit, and often connected with the medium of water.

## The Creation Of The World

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." | Genesis 1:1-2, NIV*

The heavens and the earth lay empty. We're not told how they came to be this way. We're only given a description of complete nothing-ness – a wasteland of darkness. The Hebrew words used in these verses convey the idea of desolation (*tō·hū*), an undistinguishable ruin (*wā·bō·hū*). Yet, where we would see hopelessness, God sees possibility. Out of chaos, disorder, and darkness, He brings order, light, and life.

It's into this dark chaos that the Spirit of God breaths. Hovering over the waters like a bird brooding over her young ones, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the deep, poised to begin His creative work.

The Hebrew word for 'spirit' (*wə·rū·ah*) can refer to a number



of different things. We may tend to think of it as simply breath or wind and sometimes it does mean that. But it's also used to convey more. Energy, vitality, strength, breath (as in, animating power), mind, or even life can all be meant by the word *wə·rū·aḥ*. The Biblical authors also used this word to describe God's personal Presence. Just as wind or breath is invisible, so God's Spirit is invisible; just as wind has power, God's Spirit is powerful; just as we're kept alive by breath, all things are sustained by God's Spirit (Micah 3:8-10, Ecclesiastes 11:5, Acts 2:1-5, Job 34:14-16).

The use of the word *hovering* or *brooding* in Genesis (also translated as '*fluttering lovingly*') gives us a clue as to the more complex nature of God's Spirit. God's Spirit is not just energy, like some kind of electrical current, but is His divine personal Presence, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power. His Spirit is of Him and *is* Him. He is everywhere by His Spirit. As the Psalmist poetically exclaims, there is nowhere we can go where God's Spirit is not. This is a concept not easily understood by our human minds.

*"Where can I flee from your Spirit? Or where will I run from your presence? If I rise to heaven, there you are! If I lay down with the dead, there you are! If I take wings with the dawn and settle down on the western horizon, your hand will guide me there too, while your right hand keeps a firm grip on me. If I say, "darkness will surely conceal me, and the light around me will become night," even darkness isn't dark to you, darkness and light are the same to you." | Psalm 139: 7-12, ISV*

God personally inhabits the creative work that takes place in Genesis. It is His Spirit that empowers life, light, knowledge, beauty, creativity, joy, goodness, fruitfulness, and blessings (Genesis 1:31). It was His Spirit that brought life and order out of chaos and darkness. Everything seen and

unseen is called into being by His Spirit and continues to exist by being connected to His Spirit (Job 34:14-16).

*“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; their starry host by the breath of His mouth.” | Psalm 33:6, NIV*

## **‘Whereby The World That Then Was Being Overflowed With Water Perished’**

This good world that God breathed into life did not remain that way for long. Genesis 6 paints a grim picture of a world that had fallen once more into chaos, disarray, and spiritual darkness.

Some 1600 years after creation, the world had become so evil that God regretted He had ever made humans (Genesis 6:6). In fact, it broke His heart. His Spirit, everything that is good and right, was sustaining a creation that was ‘rotten to the core’ (Genesis 6:5) and which was actively striving against God’s Spirit (Genesis 6:3). The Hebrew meaning behind Genesis 6:5 is that it was not only the imagination of humans that had been corrupted but their purposes and desires too. They had brought darkness and ruin into the world to the point where God’s Spirit, which sustained all things, including humanity, would no longer choose to sustain such evil.

Genesis 6-8 provides the narrative of the catastrophe that came upon humanity. The ‘world that then was’ was completely erased by water and all in whom the ‘spirit of life’ resided perished (Genesis 7:22).

*“And every living thing on the face of the earth was destroyed – man and livestock, crawling creatures and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth, and only Noah remained, and those with him in the ark.” | Genesis 7:23, BSB*

*"...that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished."  
| 2 Peter 3:5-6, AKJV*

Only Noah, who had '[walked with God](#)' and his family were saved (Genesis 9:6). The phrase 'walked with God' recalls, perhaps, the original unity of the relationship between humanity and God, where God had 'walked in the cool of Eden's garden' alongside humans (Genesis 3:8). This unity was disrupted when Adam and Eve, grasping at equality with God, acted in opposition to God's will, resulting in them being banished from the garden and God's Presence. 'Walking with God' is often used throughout the Bible as an expression of returning to a unified relationship with God. It's what we were created for and what God has always intended for all of humanity.

*"For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them." | Ephesians 2:10, NIV*

## **Born Again Of Water And Spirit**

It is over this vast emptiness of water that we once again see a bird hovering, signaling God's Presence (Genesis 8:8-17). 'The world that then was' had been born again of water and spirit, washed clean and ready for hope and the regeneration of life.

*"Then he [Noah] sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was **a freshly plucked olive***

*leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.” | Genesis 8: 8-12, NIV*

Centuries pass. The Spirit of God moves powerfully through the ebb and flow of the history of humanity. His intention for His creation will not be thwarted and He will walk with humanity again in a whole and restored relationship. The way He will accomplish this is, of course, through His Son, Jesus.

## Jesus | The New Creation

God steps personally into our drama by sending His Son. The Word, the expression of God, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power was poured out and made human (John 1:14).

John, the author of the fourth gospel account in the New Testament, deliberately parallels the Genesis account when beginning his record of this pivotal moment in human history; [the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God](#). He tells us that ‘*in the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God*’ (John 1:1). The use of the word *logos* here is deeply connected to who God is, to the very nature and essence of God, containing within itself the ability to intelligently and lovingly create and sustain life.

Interestingly, perhaps because of the lofty and soaring theology contained in his writings, the apostle John is often symbolised by an eagle, reminding us once again of a bird, brooding over dark waters, poised and waiting to create.

That ‘Word’, and all that is contained by the expression, became a human and ‘dwelt among us’. He was ‘*God-With-Us*’ – and anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God’s glory; the exact representation of His being (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11). In him, was life and the light of men (John 1:4).

He is the Light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart, bringing peace to the chaos and order and beauty again. That human, of course, was Jesus.

*“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, KJV*

Jesus was human like us. And yet, there was something different about him too. [He was a man, but not merely a man.](#) In him, ‘the entire fullness (completeness) of God dwelt in bodily form’ (Colossians 2:9). [Jesus was a new kind of creation,](#) a new kind of human and he came to show us how we can be a new kind of human too.

*“The first man was named Adam, and the Scriptures tell us that he was a living person. But Jesus, who may be called the last Adam, is a life-giving Spirit.” | 1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV*

Jesus came preaching the good news of salvation, of reconciliation with God, of being able to walk with God in complete harmony again. Jesus enters the tablet of human history like a blazing fire, burning away all that is false and bringing to light that which is true (Malachi 3:2-3).

There is a new reality, he affirms, one where God rules completely in the hearts of humanity and this reality, he proclaims, is right now! The kingdom of God had arrived and this new kind of living would ignite like fire in people’s hearts (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:15)

It is early in his ministry that Jesus demonstrates how this new kind of living begins. He comes to Jordan, where John the Baptist was preaching the baptism of repentance. John’s baptism was first intended to bring people to an

acknowledgment and repentance of sin.

But John also tells the crowds that a little water would mean nothing if they weren't prepared to change their lives. Baptism needed to ignite the kingdom life within a believer, renewing men and women from the inside out. They needed to be 'born again', of [water and of spirit](#).

Jesus showed exactly what this looked like. Although He didn't need baptism for the forgiveness of sin – he never committed any, he still participated in the baptism of repentance, to 'fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He demonstrated clearly what would be required of all humanity (the act of [belief and baptism](#)) to be able to participate in this new kingdom life.

Upon rising from the water, the Spirit of God came to rest upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaiming '*this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*' (Matthew 3:16). This was a public demonstration of not just the validity of Jesus as God's son but also how all believers who participate in this new creative work would experience rebirth by God's Spirit.

Not long after his baptism, Jesus confirms the significance and importance of being 'born again of water and spirit'. He speaks with Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and leader of the Jews. Nicodemus believed Jesus to truly be a teacher who had come from God and Jesus takes the opportunity to reaffirm that being reborn of water and spirit is an essential part of becoming a new creation, and 'entering the kingdom of God' (John 3:5).

The baptism of Jesus is another beautiful echo of the story first told to us in Genesis, where God's Spirit hovered like a bird over the waters, before beginning His incredible creative work. It also recalls the story of the washing and regeneration of the world in Noah's day and the new life that

was signaled by the flight of a dove above the waters.

## **New Life By The Spirit**

The truth is, what really needs washing clean is the human heart. The innermost part of humanity, where God wants to be completely at one with us, was separated from God by Adam and Eve's choices. The human heart lies in darkness and chaos and only God's Spirit can bring life and light to this disordered place (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:21-22).

As it was *in the beginning*, the chaos and darkness that is in our lives can be washed clean and reordered. Regeneration, to be born anew, is the termination of people of the old creation with all their deeds and the germination of them in the new creation with the divine life. We take all of the darkness, failure, chaos, and ruin of our life and surrender it to God, who erases it in the water of baptism (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Light enters the darkness. That light is Jesus and he brings the knowledge of God into our hearts.

*“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, ESV*

New life is ignited in us and the new human is reborn. Yet this new life does not come without the promise of help (Ephesians 1:13-14). Jesus tells his disciples that God will send them a comforter to teach and guide them in this new kingdom life. They will be empowered and sustained by nothing less than the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit; the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

*“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and **He will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.** The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you do know Him, for He abides with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” | John 14:15-16, 26, ESV*

*“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, **and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off – to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself. With many other words he testified, and he urged them, “Be saved from this corrupt generation.” Those who embraced his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the believers that day” | Acts 2:38-41, BSB*

*“He redeemed us in order that the blessing promised to Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive **the promise of the Spirit.**” | Galatians 3:14, BSB*

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the good news to the world, making disciples of all nations, he gave them the following instruction:

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in **the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” | Matthew 28:19-20, NIV*



## Holy Spirit | This Same Power

The mechanism by which we are renewed, as Christians, is no different from that in the past. It is God's Spirit, which has been *with* God and *is* God since the beginning, and by which everything seen and unseen was created.

Having surrendered our own self-will, we are instructed to ask, as little children would from a parent, for the gift of God's Spirit to come and 'make His home with us' (Luke 11:13, John 14:23). In our new kingdom life, we are directed by God's Spirit in the face of evil and doubt and are strengthened by the teachings of His written Word, the Bible (John 14:16-17, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We are filled with faith and hope, because of the love of God which has been shed in our hearts by His Spirit (Romans 5:5). We rejoice in the Lord, and in the strength of His might, acknowledging that even in this renewing and regeneration, the work is not ours but His (Philippians 2:13, Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 4:6-7). We are comforted, despite our Saviour's absence (John 14:18-25), walking in the path of light by God's Spirit (Romans 8:14, 1 John 1:7).

Our bodies become temples of the living God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), where His Spirit is pleased to dwell (Romans 8:9) and we wait, with patience in this life, for the final redemption of our mortal bodies by that same Spirit at Jesus' return (Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:53, Romans 2:7, 2 Corinthians 5:4).

*"None of us has anything which he did not receive. To begin with, God gives to all life and breath, and in Him we live and move and have our being. Then, fallen creatures as we now are, God gives the blessing of His Son to open out the way of life; and He gives His Word to tell of His purpose which culminates in that Son. To follow that, He promises all needful help from above to answer the needs of His servants and strengthen them*

*on the way of pilgrimage to the Kingdom of His glory. The apostle [Paul] bids disciples offer their bodies a living sacrifice to God that, by His power and blessing, they may be both strengthened to do them and as the essential road to their own salvation, that they may be “transformed by the renewing of their mind, that they may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God”, who through Christ their Lord, “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” | Alfred Norris, The Holy Spirit and the Believer Today*

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# **Regeneration + The Holy Spirit**

*“Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” | 2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV*

There can be a tendency to reduce the work of the gospel to simply to a culture of ‘making us nice’. That is to say, that being a Christian equates to a program of basic self-improvement. Yet there are plenty of nice people who aren’t Christians; people who do good things for others without having Jesus in their life. And while Jesus does, of course, make a difference in the lives of believers, it’s more than just ‘making us nice’.

# New Not Nice

Jesus didn't come to *improve us* – he came to *save us!*

We were made to [walk with God](#) and dwell in His presence. God, who is the source of all life, made humans in His image and in His likeness, with the potential and capability to be like Him, to reflect His glory throughout the earth.

But the effects of sin entering the world were dramatic and far-reaching. Humanity died that day – not physically or immediately, but spiritually. Our union with God was severed and we became separated from God's presence. And just as we have inherited physical life from our parents, we also inherit spiritual death. Every human who is born comes into the world physically alive but spiritually dead. Without our spiritual connection with God, we are nothing more than 'dead men walking', living in darkness and far from the eternal life God intended for us.

And no amount of 'nice' can fix this.

*"With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity. But that isn't what you learned about Christ. Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy." | Ephesians 4:17-24, ESV*

The Christian life doesn't start with reformation. You cannot reform a dead heart. The Christian life starts with a radical

regeneration. From spiritual death comes a resurrected life, a new nature, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

A truly gospel-shaped life is one that begins in death. [Baptism](#), the Bible tells us, is a symbol of the death that Jesus experienced. And by his death, he destroyed the power of sin and death; those things which keep us separated from God and the life He has purposed for us. Through Jesus, it becomes possible for us to be reconciled again to God's good life and His life-giving spirituality. We're told, if we die with Jesus (in baptism), we will also live with him, participants in his resurrection life. That life starts right now, the very moment a believer rises from the waters of baptism.

*"That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word."*

| Romans 6:3-10, MSG

If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his [life-giving resurrection](#)! Not just as some future hope or aspirational thought but as a reality, right now! Our dead spirituality is reborn, renewed, and regenerated in Jesus. It's into the darkness of spiritual death that God has shone His glorious light of life, the knowledge of the glory of Himself expressed in Jesus.

This is why Paul can so confidently say in his letters to the churches at Colosse and Corinth:

*“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory...” | Colossians 3:4, ESV*

*“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, KJV*

## Saved Not Sincere

When we accept [the truth of our situation](#) and choose to do something about it, the Bible doesn't tell us to 'believe and be sincere'. The Bible tells us to believe and [be saved](#). That's not to say that sincerity isn't important. Of course it is. But the emphasis – the first word about the action that takes place – is about the activity of God. It's God who is saving us and it's God who is renewing us. It's God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

**God** graciously gives salvation to those who repent and believe. It is **His** action in our lives that makes the difference. **He** transfers us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of His son, **He** adopts us as His children and **the Spirit** himself bears witness to this new identity.

The work of saving is entirely God's and this is why we can confidently preach 'that we are saved by grace through faith alone and not by our works'. [Grace is what saves, faith is the instrument through which it is effected.](#)

This is vitally important because when we believe our faith is

what saves us\*, we begin to measure our faith (and others') by the intensity of it (or the lack thereof). We begin to think of faith as a single act, rather than a life of orientation.

*“Faith isn’t an emotion God evaluates by its intensity. Faith is trust and it’s only as good as the object of its trust. So the question isn’t, “do you truly believe?” but “who do you believe in?” We must point continually to God in Christ, who is good and generous and amazingly gracious. We trust Him and His grace for our salvation, not the strength of our emotions.” | Michael Lawrence*

Faith trusts that this work isn't ours – it's God's and He's doing it for His glory. [He saves not because of who we are but because of who He is.](#) Why? Because He loves us.

*“Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with every good thing to do His will. And may He accomplish in us what is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” | Hebrews 13:20-21, NIV*

*“For it is God who works in you to will and to act on behalf of His good pleasure.” | Phillipians 2:13, NIV*

*“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore you, secure you, strengthen you, and establish you. To Him be the power forever and ever. Amen.” | 1 Peter 5:10 BSB*

## **Disciples Not Decisions**

Our resurrected life is not dominated by decisions that come and go but by faithfully following Jesus. Every Christian's

life starts at a certain point, with a decision, but that one decision alone is not enough to make us a disciple. Resurrection life continues as a life marked by discipleship. Every day, the mission is the same: a commitment to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost.

Having faith does not mean *'being spiritual'* or *'belonging to a faith community'* or *'seeking spiritual direction'*. Of course, it may involve those things but having faith is wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, and this trust is constantly affirmed and demonstrated by a transformed life.

It's examining ourselves, not just on Sunday, but every day, to see if we are *'in the faith'*.

It's waiting on Jesus.

We must be committed to not just making *'a faithful decision'* on any given day, but to being disciples – life-long followers of Jesus who take up their cross, enduring hardship, because our trust is in Jesus' sacrifice and God's promise to us in this.

But we are not alone in our resurrected life.

*"If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." | Romans 8:11, ESV*

*"...This is my [Paul's] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that inner illumination of the Spirit which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how tremendous is the power*

*available to us who believe in God. That power is the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips*

God’s own Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are His children. Our existence is now framed by Christ’s life – who is, himself, a life-giving Spirit.

*“The first man was named Adam, and the Scriptures tell us that he was a living person. But Jesus, who may be called the last Adam, is a life-giving spirit.” | 1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV*

This resurrected life comes with the promise of help (Ephesians 1:13-14) from the Spirit of God Himself. Jesus tells his disciples that God will send them a *comforter, counsellor, advocate or helper* (παράκλητος (paráklētos) to teach and guide them. The spark of new life that has been lit in their hearts will grow and be sustained by nothing less than the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit; the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

*“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you do know Him, for He abides with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” | John 14:15-16, 26, ESV*



*“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off – to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself. With many other words he testified, and he urged them, “Be saved from this corrupt generation.” Those who embraced his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the believers that day.” | Acts 2:38-41, BSB*

*“He redeemed us in order that the blessing promised to Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” | Galatians 3:14, BSB*

## **Led By The Spirit**

Christianity is a relationship, not a [ritual](#) or a religious code of ethics. It's living in [communion](#) with the Father and His Son and being constantly led by the Holy Spirit in our discipleship. It's living in freedom from the power that sin and death formerly had over us.

This freedom is one of the most precious realities of our regenerated life.

In no way does this deny the continuous struggle believers still have with sin, but we can have trust and confidence that we have been transferred out of sin's dominion and into the kingdom of Jesus; that we are a child of God and that, day by day, we are being renewed and transformed into the likeness of His Son.

Not only this, the blood of Jesus is able to cleanse us from all sin. If we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive.

*“For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and*

*brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.” | Colossians 1:13, NIV*

*“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” | Romans 8:9-11, NIV*

*“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” | 1 Corinthians 3:16 – NIV*

We are empowered to live a fully reconciled '[kingdom life](#)', both with God and to each other, brought together as [family and community](#) through the precious blood of our saviour. Together, believers become the church of Christ – his body; fellow citizens with the family and household of God, and a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Our greatest hope and expectation is that Christ, who is our life, will one day appear and change our corruptible bodies to incorruptible bodies and we will be forever with our Lord ([Romans 8:11](#), [1 Corinthians 15:53](#), [Romans 2:7](#), [2 Corinthians 5:4](#)).

God always intended to dwell with His people and, through Jesus, this became possible. The Holy Spirit works powerfully in us to change our hearts. Christians are now connected, in a deeply spiritual way, to the source of eternal life for which we were always purposed. Our faith, hope, and love grow more each day in similarity to the One who empowers our life and we begin to look more and more like Him.

The power and truth of the gospel are displayed when people begin to live differently, empowered by God's Spirit. We become a community that can only be explained by a gospel that truly converts and changes lives.

For those of us who may have been out of step with the Spirit, now is the time to open our hearts and our lives to the transforming and regenerating work of the Spirit. Ask, as a child would from a parent, for the gift of the Spirit to come and create in you a new heart.

Now is the season to discover how to walk alongside the Spirit, not expecting God to do all the work, nor trying to do it all ourselves. Being led by the Spirit is following Jesus in faithful discipleship, in partnership with God in His great kingdom mission, fully empowered by His Eternal Spirit.

*"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" | Luke 11:13, NIV*

*"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." | Romans 15:13, NIV*

*"And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." | Romans 5:5 – NIV*

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**\*If faith doesn't save, then why does James make such a big deal about faith and works? When he wrote his letter, James was actually concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is**

'Christian' in name only. James is talking about those who make a 'one-time decision' to 'be a Christian' and yet nothing really changes in their lives. He is tackling a different, yet no less dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can 'continue in sin that grace may abound'. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) needs to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough, and that we don't need to 'do better' because God's grace covers all our shortcomings anyway. James is talking about a half-gospel, one that possibly makes us 'feel better about ourselves' but doesn't convert our hearts or demonstrate true [discipleship](#) by a transformed life.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless it's demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace. This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated by a Christian in 'what they do'. This is what discipleship is all about.*

You can read more about the Faith | Works Conundrum [here](#) or Discipleship [here](#).

This article was first published 2 March 2020

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## Judging // Discerning

It seems to me that it has become increasingly difficult to speak into many issues or situations that the church faces today; not because the Bible is silent, not because the church doesn't have or hasn't held a historical position on a matter, and not because we, as Christians, don't know *what we ought to be doing*. Rather, we are feeling pressed into silence, in many instances, simply on the basis of one little verse found at the beginning of Matthew 7; "*Judge not, that you be not*

*judged*".

This verse, plucked from Matthew's gospel, thrown around *ad voluntatem* by Christians and non-Christians alike, and often applied wildly out of context, is causing widespread paralysis for many Christians and indeed the church, preventing us from being able to affirm and proclaim the reality that Christian life calls us to.

Afraid of being labeled 'judgy', 'divisive', or 'self-righteous', we're clamming up about things we really should be vocal about, choosing silence over sincerity. We're focused on preaching love and acceptance (both good things, by the way), but we're failing to qualify how and what that looks like in a Christian context.

Not only does there seem to be a growing degree of confusion about the difference between '*judging*', particularly in the context of Matthew 7, and '*discerning*' for the individual Christian, there also seems to be some confusion about the church's responsibility and role in all this.

Perhaps embarrassed by our failures and our unchristian treatment of both believers and unbelievers in the past, we're now collectively overcompensating by saying nothing at all, reducing the church's critical witness of the name of Jesus, in many instances, to a 'cloud with no rain'.

Many times, the church actually looks no different on the inside to the way people are living on the outside, as if coming to Christ *changed nothing at all*.

## **The Christian Ideal**

Christians are called to a life of holiness, of renewal and transformation; becoming part of the new creation found in Christ. Christians are those who have accepted the call out of the dominion of darkness, with all its pointless chaos and unfruitful works of darkness, into kingdom life; and the

acknowledgment that living God's way, according to His plan and purposes for humanity, is good for us and glorifying to Him.

*"You can't read the New Testament without seeing the call to holiness in the Christian life. But that holiness is a work of God's grace as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live a life pleasing to God. New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege not a heavy burden and duty. New Testament holiness enhances life, it never diminishes it." | Lance Ralston*

God's way is the benchmark for Christian living, the way we should aspire to, the truth we ought to affirm. It's referred to often in scripture as *walking in the light, walking with God, or walking in the way* and I talk more about this in my article ['Walking With God'](#).

The caveat to this is, of course, that we are *not there yet*. The Christian life is a journey, not an instant transformation. *We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved*. Sanctification, the *'being saved'* part, means we are all a constant work in progress, being renewed and conformed daily into the image of Christ.

What this means, in real terms, is that we will still mess up, sometimes in big ways. These lapses in our Christian walk are stumbles off the path leading us home, deviations from the good way that God has intended for us to live.

While these failures can often be hard to move past, it's important to recognise that they don't need to define us, at least not in a negative way.

We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We are more than simply the sum of our mistakes. I talk more about this in my article ['Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow'](#).

The joy of Christian life is that sin no longer has the same hold over us as before. We belong to Jesus and his blood cleanses us from all sin. In him, we can find forgiveness and find it many times over.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle wants us to comprehend the reality that we are no longer in this battle on our own. He says, *“May you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.”* (Ephesians 3:18, NLT). God is with us in this fight, empowering us daily through His Spirit and washing us clean in the blood of the lamb.

What may seem impossible to us is made possible by the love of Christ.

## **Objective Truth**

It feels difficult to write this article without coming off as intolerant, self-righteous, or bigoted. Any time one states a definite opinion on a matter as if that position is the right one, one risks sounding dogmatic and judgmental and I acknowledge it may be no different in this case.

I think our post-modern society has further exaggerated this reality. Our 21st-century culture posits the idea that truth is not absolute and universal (as was once accepted), but rather that our truth *is* truth, even though that truth may be merely subjective and based on or influenced by our own personal feelings, tastes, or opinions.

Conversely, our neighbour’s truth, based on or influenced by their personal feelings, tastes, or opinions is also just as true, irrespective of the reality that our two truths may be diametrically opposed to one another.

It’s often no longer acceptable to hold to and defend certain

views as anything more than being subjectively true, particularly in religious or moral matters.

The Bible cuts through this subjective narrative and states that truth is objective, rooted in the person and character of God Himself. Whatever we hold to be true to the Christian faith has its roots in God (or should, at least), who has been revealed to us in His Word, and which is sufficient to inform our Christian way of life and ethics.

*“Every scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice.”* (2 Timothy 3:16, DR). This is what is meant by *sola scriptura* – that the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

As Christians, we believe that biblical truth is not *our* truth and therefore merely subjective, it is God’s truth. We hold to the reality that God’s truth was demonstrated in Jesus for all humanity to see; and we acknowledge his supremacy and authority over our lives. In doing so we affirm that living God’s way is right and true and good.

The question is, what do we do, individually and collectively, when Christian life doesn’t look as it should, where there is disregard or apathy toward living God’s way, or where it seems that sin is being trivialised, tolerated, or overlooked?

What does the gospel of Matthew mean when it says ‘judge not’? Is an individual’s responsibility different from that of the collective body, the church? Is it being too judgey to talk about sin?

And how does the church protect the name of Jesus, displaying the glory of God to the nations, in practice?

## **Judging Or Discerning?**



## Discerning

I want to make the distinction between discerning and proclaiming what *God's way* is, and judging someone's eternal reality.

Long ago, God intended to use the church as an example of His incredible wealth and grace towards humanity and His intention and plan to bring everything together under Christ, for His own glory. She is imperfect and yet magnificent because the living God is the source of her existence and empowerment. As individuals and collectively, as the church, it is our mandate to preach God's good news to the world and to live as if we believe it to be true.

Paul the Apostle puts it this way: *"Live no longer as the Gentiles do...for they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasures and eagerly practice every kind of impurity...Put on your new nature, created to be like God-truly righteous and holy."* (Ephesians 4:17-24, NLT)

He goes on to give several examples of what *'being like God looks like'*: no longer lying, no longer using foul language, no longer stealing, no longer engaging in sexual immorality, or being selfish or greedy (amongst other things). He states, *'with the Lord's authority'* (v17), that those things are not of God, are not life-giving, and ought not to be pursued by a person professing to be a Christian.

Discerning God's way of living (*'carefully determining what pleases the Lord'* (Ephesians 5:10)), which is intended to be life-giving and good for humanity, is a vitally important element of our Christian discipleship, and, collectively, as a witness to the watching world.

Moral truth exists, vested in the person and character of God Himself, and Christians ought to be preaching and pursuing it

with all their hearts, both individually and collectively. To do otherwise is to reject the authority and supremacy of God over our lives.

## **Judging**

Yet, we don't get it right a lot of the time. Sin no longer has the same hold over us as before, but we still give it plenty of opportunities to gain a foothold in our life.

And too often, we, as individuals, look sideways at our Christian family and privately (or publicly) make bold pronouncements about their *eternal salvation* based on past failures or current struggles. We judge them harshly and with finality in the secret recesses of our hearts, by standards that we would buckle under ourselves.

We say to ourselves, 'they *may* have found forgiveness with God (though we highly doubt it) but they will never find forgiveness with us or in our church, no matter their repentant heart or confession of failure'.

Matthew warns us about taking such a harsh position of judgment against our Christian brothers and sisters, for with the same inflexible judgment we exact we risk being judged ourselves. If we truly believe and accept the grace God has shown to us, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others. I talk more about the implementation of grace in my article '[The White Flag Of Grace](#)' and the necessity of forgiveness in my article '[Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig](#)'.

We need to hold in careful tension the critical reality of the eternal consequences of not living God's way, of choosing a way that is not life-giving, resolutely naming sin and the need for repentance, alongside the reality that Christians still mess up and that forgiveness is always possible with God and should be practiced between individuals and within the church.

(In saying that, there are often consequences that flow from our actions which may negatively impact our life moving forward, particularly in relation to our ministry or relationships in the church. These consequences are often complex, requiring wise pastoral care and support to work through.)

We are not to judge one another's *eternal salvation* based on past or present struggles but neither are we to overlook our calling to holiness and the orienting of our lives toward God.

## What Is The Church's Responsibility?

The Apostle Paul dealt with some real doozy situations in his letters. Take, for example, the situation in the church in Corinth; a case of sexual immorality not even heard of among 'pagans' (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). A believer in the church was boldly and proudly 'living in sin' with his stepmother, or, as some translations have it, his father's wife.

Paul is horrified at such a situation and tells the church that, collectively, they ought to be in mourning in sorrow and shame. Such things ought not to be even named among the people of God, let alone practiced (Ephesians 5:3).

The letter to the Corinthians is a very confronting letter, in many respects. Paul leaves no room for doubt as to what he thinks about the situation and what the church must do. He (shockingly) tells them that they must remove the man from their fellowship. *"You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns."*

He continues, *"In my other letter, I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people. But **I wasn't talking about the people of this world.** You would have to leave this world*

to get away from everyone who is immoral or greedy or who cheats or worships idols. I was talking about **your own people** who are immoral or greedy or worship idols or curse others or get drunk or cheat. **Don't even eat with them!** Why should I judge outsiders? **Aren't we supposed to judge only church members?** God judges everyone else. The Scriptures say, "Chase away any of your own people who are evil." (1 Corinthians 5:4-9)

It's very clear, the church is not to sit in judgment of the world, that's God's prerogative. But we *are* to collectively judge the conduct and witness of the church to which we belong (essentially, the whole body is responsible for judging the whole body) and leave no space for evil to grow, unchecked. For those Christians who are unrepentant and proudly indulging in sin, the church isn't even to eat with such people (1 Corinthians 5:11).

(It's important to note here that one church is not at liberty to sit in judgment of another. A local church has oversight over its own members, not over another church. The authority to remove a lampstand of Jesus or determine whether a lampstand should be removed from its place of influence belongs to the King alone (Revelation 2:5). No person or group should dare presume such authority over Jesus' church and its local expressions.)

Yet the church can sometimes be too hasty in pronouncing judgment. Paul clearly differentiates in other places in scripture between those Christians who are *indulging in sin* (1 Corinthians 5:9) and those who find themselves *caught in transgression* (Galatians 6:1). His pastoral advice regarding the response to each is different, despite both being issues of 'sin'. An important element of church discipline is to sensitively and accurately establish the nature of a situation, before deciding how the church ought to proceed.

## Restoring

First and foremost, we are ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation; of pointing to the work of Christ, and our great need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

We are part of God's great mission of restoration and redemption and this reality should be at the forefront of any response to sin in the church.

The church has a responsibility to make sure that we are accurately representing Jesus to the world; preaching the necessary call to holiness of the Christian life whilst acknowledging we are not yet made perfect and we still mess up.

We ought to seek first, on every occasion and at every opportunity, to restore a person who has *wandered away from truth*. We pray for them and with them, we remind them of the realities of the gospel, of the forgiveness found in Jesus, and of the healing warmth of God's light.

We love them, we accept their struggle with sin as something common to us all, and yet we encourage them not to shrink back from Christ in shame but rather to turn to him anew in humble confession and repentance.

One of the most powerful and eternally significant things a church can do is to rescue one who has fallen into sin. "*My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.*" (James 5:19-20)

Discipleship within the local church means that each member acknowledges they are part of the body, a body that collectively has the authority to declare who belongs to Jesus and the responsibility of teaching, caring for, correcting,

loving, and disciplining its members.

The church, therefore, *affirms a person's profession of faith in Jesus and gives oversight to that individual's discipleship*, and, in turn, the individual *submits his or her discipleship to the care and oversight of the church and commits themselves in service to the building up of the church*. It's a symbiotic-esque relationship referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 as *'one another-ing'*.

## **Protecting**

Unfortunately, as the case in the church at Corinth demonstrates, there will be some who are completely unrepentant, who *'make a practice of sinning'* (1 John 5:18), and who reject the pursuit of holiness that Christians are called to. These people *"are ungodly men and women, saying that God's marvellous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."* (Jude 1:4)

An individual Christian is not responsible for overseeing another Christian's membership in the body of Christ, but the church, made up of all its members is. It's how the church protects the name of Jesus.

*"Church discipline, then, is fundamentally about love. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). The same is true for his church. Love in the Bible is holy. It makes demands. It yields obedience. It doesn't delight in evil but rejoices in the truth."* (1 Corinthians 13:6) | Jonathan Leeman

*"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction*

*that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” | Galatians 5:22-25 MSG*

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# **Ruth: The Inconsequential Outsider**

## **The Weft And Warp Of Scripture**

The word of God is like a vast tapestry, its main theme interwoven with many sub-plots and side stories that run like golden threads through an intricate design. Each of these threads complements the complete telling of [God's story](#) and narrates again and again to us the way in which God views our world and us, the people who inhabit it.

The story of Ruth, a seemingly inconsequential outsider, is one of these golden threads. At face value, it appears to be a brief narrative concerning an unimportant family, living in a [small and insignificant rural village\\*](#). It hardly seems a

grand stage on which the compelling drama of God's purpose is to be acted out.

The story is placed within the time period known as "The Judges" (thought to be around 1220 – 1050 B.C.), when heroes like Samson the Mighty and Ehud the Brave lived- impressive and inspiring characters, who took centre stage in the dramas that unfolded around them.

The story of Ruth seems, at first glance, a strange and somewhat ordinary inclusion in the rather extraordinary cast that surrounds it. And yet, when we consider each part of this remarkable story, we understand that we are being told something very important about God and about ourselves. We learn that God sees into our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). He is more interested in what we can become, than in who we are right now, and that our very ordinariness is what God sees and works with to bring us to an extraordinary place.

In fact, God often does some of His best work with the most unlikely people, as the story of Ruth proves.

## **Who Was Ruth?**

Ruth was, by definition, an outsider. She was not an Israelite but a native of the country of [Moab](#), a mountainous tract of land now in modern Jordan. She had married an Israelite man who was living in Moab with his family; his parents and his brother. The family had relocated due to a famine that had occurred in their homeland and in chapter 1 of the story, Ruth and her husband had been married for 10 years before he, and his brother, both fell ill and died.

It seems tragedy had already befallen the family previously, with the death of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law, very soon after the family's relocation. The death of the sons now left Ruth, her sister-in-law, Orpah, and Naomi, her mother-in-law, as widows, in probably very bleak circumstances.



Ruth was, of all people, an unlikely heroine. Not only was she a woman, in a time when women were of minor importance, but she was also now a widow. Finally, she was poor and foreign and would have been considered an outsider to any true-born Israelite.

## Ruth's Story

Ruth may have been poor in position but she was rich in love and faith. When Naomi, her mother-in-law, made the decision to return to her homeland of Israel, Ruth did not hesitate to follow her. She left all that was familiar, everything that she was culturally connected to, and, much like [faithful Abraham](#) before her, she *“went out, not knowing where she was going...”* (Hebrews 11:8).

She heard the call of God and she followed, with an implicit faith and unswerving devotion. She trusted the journey and embraced the destination, even though she hadn't yet seen it. This is the definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1-3). Faith is what distinguishes her character and faith is what motivated her choices, which become more and more evident to us as we discover her story.

The story is short in its telling and it's well worth pausing here and [reading it quickly for yourself](#).

Like every great story, it contains all the important elements of interest; drama, grief, desolation, decision, redemption, and resolution. As a stand-alone story, it would be successful in its own right. Yet it is the conclusion to the story that makes us really sit up and take notice. This is where we realise that nothing is an afterthought to God, nobody is *actually* inconsequential and His plan is purposeful and far-reaching.

He has a definitive purpose and plan and every single person can play their part. There is a place for all of us in God's

story, if we choose it.

Ruth made the choice and decision to follow Naomi, to become part of God's plan. Yet even she couldn't have realised the extent to which God would involve her. The epilogue of the story contains an unbelievable twist, a beautiful thread that we almost have to read twice to believe.

## **Ruth's Defining Legacy**

Ruth found a home, belonging, and happiness in Israel and went on to marry Boaz, a wealthy and respected landowner. She was accepted completely into the family of [Abraham](#), father of the Israelite people.

She also became the mother to a little boy called Obed (Ruth 4:16). Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse, in time, became the father of David, one of the greatest kings in Israel's history. David would become famous, not only for his skill with the harp and his compassionate love for and protection of his sheep as a shepherd boy but also for his courage and bravery in fighting against the enemy Goliath, his stirring example as a brilliant military leader and king, and his complete trust and faith in God.

Most breathtaking of all, King David became an ancestor of Jesus Christ, God's own Son! This makes Ruth an incredibly significant and vital part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

God's methods often [confound and confuse us](#). He doesn't always choose who we would expect or work in the way we would like. He sees all, from the beginning to the end (Isaiah 46:10), while we can only see a small portion of now. His purpose is perfectly orchestrated and remarkably interwoven in ways that amaze us.

In the story of Ruth, an inconsequential outsider, we see that God gets involved in the lives of all kinds of men and women,

bringing about His purpose. We can take confidence and have faith that He can and will work in our lives, in the same way, and that we too can become part of [His story](#), if we choose it.

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\* Here's another plot twist for those of you who love a good story! Wondering about that "small and insignificant rural village", found at the beginning of this tale? That village is none other than the little town of Bethlehem, where, many years from Ruth's time, a small baby [would be born](#), in humble circumstances, and would be laid, sleeping, in a manger; [Jesus – the hope of the world!](#)

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## The Faith | Works 'Conundrum'

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

### Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible's most beautiful theme. Grace began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, 'God-With-Us', the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God's Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end." – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV*

## **Salvation Isn't Earned**

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God."*  
– Romans 5:1-2, NIV

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become 'more righteous' before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, “right standing with God” – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul’s contemporary, James, who writes “As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**” (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

## **Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone**

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James’ letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn’t always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional ‘spiritual acts’ that are undertaken, that we are made “right with God by **what we do**”. This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of ‘what we do’ is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is ‘Christian’ in name only. He is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can ‘continue in sin that grace may abound’. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become ‘saved’. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don’t need to ‘do better’ because God’s grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God*

*by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace. This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian's life by 'what they do'.*

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

*"Do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense." – James 2:17-24 MSG*

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying "Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works." (James 2:26, CSB).

## **Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real**

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action.

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as 'the friend of God' (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn't doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as "reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." Abraham believed God was 'good for His word' and this is why, James says, he was

justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say “Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified.” Neither does he say “Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified.” or that “Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore was justified. He says, “Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness.” He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham’s life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was ‘made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham’s life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham’s faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham’s original profession of belief. Was it the living kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren’t justified by works. James is answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, “How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive ‘[the righteousness of God](#)’?”, both men would answer “As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness.”

However, if you asked them, “Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?”, Paul will answer “No, not

if by 'works', you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God's blessings" (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer "Yes, if by 'works', you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer's life". Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us 'right with God' does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

## What Does Living Faith Look Like?

*"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." – 1 John 4:11*

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to 'freedom in Jesus' is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather 'freedom to serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:14). It's in the **believing** and **doing** that faith is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

*"Wasn't our ancestor Abraham "made right with God by works" when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the Scripture sentence, "Abraham believed God and was set right with God," includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that*



*a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?” – James 2: 21-24, MSG*

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we ‘earn God’s favour’ but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

*“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

*Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG*

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn’t real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a

corpse.

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