

Who and What Is a True Christian?

The world has various ideas about who and what a “Christian” is or isn’t. Some think a Christian is anyone born into a Christian-professing family and christened by a priest or minister. Others say a Christian is one who has “given his heart to the Lord” and is “born again”—or perhaps one who simply *claims* to be a Christian.

Is it possible, however, for someone to live and die assuming that he or she is a Christian—only to find out in the Judgment that God never recognized their brand of “Christianity”? Christ, in fact, warned of that very possibility in Matt. 7:21-23.

What truly makes a person a Christian? How does GOD describe a Christian in His inspired word—the Bible? Serious followers of Christ will diligently study their Bibles to understand the true definition of a Christian—and to make sure that they are, indeed, true Christians (II Tim. 3:15-17). They will have their minds and hearts set to love God the Father and Jesus Christ with all their hearts and all their minds and all their strength (Mark 12:28-30). They will be committed to *live by every word of God* (Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deut 8:3), proving all things from the Scriptures (I Thess. 5:21; Acts 17:10-12).

No Longer Under the Penalty of Sin: Crucial to understanding the *Bible definition* of a Christian is the fact that all human beings have been sinners, including ourselves (Rom. 3:23). The penalty for sin is permanent death (Rom. 6:23). A Christian is one who has come to realize that he or she had been under that death penalty and in need of a Savior. A Christian understands that Jesus Christ paid that penalty by dying on the cross when He was completely innocent of any sin (II Cor. 5:21; I John 2:2; 4:10; Rev. 1:5; 5:9).

A Christian learns just what, *specifically*, is sin—and what brought the death penalty upon them in the first place. Again, the world has its own ideas about what sin is or isn’t, but the Bible defines sin for us as the transgression of the law of God (I John 3:4).

A true Christian, then, is one who has had the blood of Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death applied to him or to her—but only after having acknowledged and completely *repented* of their sins (toward God the Father) and accepted Christ as their personal Savior (Acts 3:19; 2:38; Ezek. 18:21-23). Repentance literally means a change of mind and attitude, as well as a complete *change of conduct* and *way of living*. Through personal repentance, one literally *turns from* the way of sin (breaking God’s law) that leads to death (Prov. 14:12; 16:25; Matt. 7:13) and begins walking in God’s way—the true, Christian way of life (John 14:4-6; Acts 16:17; 18:25-26; I John 2:3-6).

Living in God’s Grace: In order to become a Christian one has to be baptized, by full water immersion, into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. After the laying on of hands (Heb. 6:2), the new convert receives the gift of the Holy Spirit from Christ and the Father, by which a person is begotten as a new creation in Jesus Christ (Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38; 8:14-17; II Cor. 1:22; I John 3:9, 22-24).

By truly believing in Jesus Christ and in His name, repenting of sin, and asking God the Father’s forgiveness, one comes under God’s saving *grace* (Rom. 3:23-26; 6:23). This grace (which is so precious!) is a *free gift* from God—totally undeserved by anyone. No amount of effort by anyone could ever come close to earning this gift of God’s favor. Being a “good person” will not earn you salvation—for God does not “owe” salvation to anyone! “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this especially is not of your own selves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Once baptized—and having received the gift of God’s Holy Spirit—what should the newly converted Christian then do? Can a true Christian continue living as before? Does being “under grace” mean that one can go back and continue practicing what he or she supposedly repented of? Absolutely not! The apostle Paul makes it clear that one is not to continue to *live in sin*—

continually transgressing the laws and commandments of God. Notice Romans 6:1-3: “What then shall we say? Shall we continue in sin, so that grace may abound? MAY IT NEVER BE! We who died to sin, how shall we live any longer therein? Or are you ignorant that we, as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into His death?”

A New Life in Christ: Notice how Paul goes on in Romans six to describe the *new* life of a true Christian. “Therefore, we were buried with Him through the baptism into the death; so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, in the same way, we also should **walk in newness of life**. For if we have been conjoined together in the likeness of His death, so also shall we be in the likeness of His resurrection. Knowing this, that our old man was co-crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be destroyed, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin; because the one who has died to sin has been justified from sin. Now if we died together with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has any dominion over Him. For when He died, He died unto sin once for all; but in that He lives, He lives unto God. In the same way also, you should indeed reckon yourselves to be **dead to sin**, but **alive to God** through Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, do not let sin rule in your mortal body by obeying it in the lusts thereof. Likewise, do not yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin; rather, yield yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom. 6:4-13, emphasis added).

In both the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27) and the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) Christ makes it clear that once having received a gift from God, one is not expected to sit on it or bury it—but to *build* on it, to *increase* it. Christians are to grow spiritually to become ever more like Jesus and the Father (II Pet. 1:3-11; 3:18; Eph. 4:11-13; 5:1). With this goal in mind, the true Christian studies his or her Bible regularly (II Tim. 2:15) to learn to *follow the example* set by Christ when He walked the earth in the flesh (John 13:15; 14:6; I Pet. 2:21; I John 2:6). In this way, God leads one through the power of His Holy Spirit and creates in each Christian His godly character (Eph. 2:10) and the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5).

Christ’s Example Shows the Way: What was the example Jesus Christ set for His followers? For starters, He perfectly kept His Father’s commandments (John 15:10). His life’s example, however, was not merely a legalistic, letter-of-the-law obedience—it was obedience from the heart, because He loved the Father with his *whole being*. A true Christian is to love God the Father and Jesus Christ with all his heart, all his mind, all his soul, and all his strength—which is the greatest commandment of all (Matt. 22:37-40). In this passage Jesus declares that LOVE, whether toward God or neighbor, is the basis for all of God’s spiritual law. Each precept of the law merely tells us *how* to love. Also, there is a *spirit* and *intent* behind every law or command of God—and that intent is best summed up in one word, LOVE. If God tells us to do (or not to do) something, His motivation is always love (I John 4:8; 5:2-3).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5, 6, 7), Christ outlined how the spirit and intent of the law translates into personal conduct. Belief in the principles He has taught, however, is not enough—for they are of value only IF one *applies* and *lives* by them (Matt. 7:24-27). A true Christian—who loves God and knows that His laws are based on love—will in faith obey from the heart whatever He asks of him or her (John 14:15; I John 5:3). And a Christian’s obedience will not be based on fear (of losing salvation, etc.), or because it “earns” them anything—but will be motivated by their love toward God, and because they understand that heartfelt obedience empowers them to become more and more like God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Many, unfortunately, mistakenly think that love and obedience to God’s commandments are somehow opposites—in conflict with one another. Nothing could be further from the truth! Often, those who claim to be Christian will say they “love the Lord” or “know the Lord”—yet they fail to obey Him. The apostle John has an answer for such people. “And by this standard we

know that we know Him: if we keep [obey] His commandments. The one who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep [obey] His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. On the other hand, if anyone is keeping [obeying] His Word, truly in this one the love of God is being perfected. By this means we know that we are in Him. Anyone who claims to dwell in Him is obligating himself also to walk even as He Himself walked" (I John 2:3-6).

A Spirit-led Life: Many churchgoers assume they are already pretty good people. The apostle Paul, on the other hand—after relating how he also did that which was not right—said of himself, "O wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:14-24). Why did a holy apostle and man of God call himself "wretched"? Because he understood that his own human nature was not godly—and he was honest and humble enough to admit it. He likewise admitted that—even after conversion—his old carnal nature still led him to sin for which he had to repent and ask forgiveness.

Notice his explanation of human nature in Romans 8:7-14: "Because the carnal mind [the mind of the unconverted] is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God; neither indeed can it be. Now then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God is indeed dwelling within you. **But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.** Now if Christ be within you, the body is indeed dead because of sin; however, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. Now if the Spirit of Him Who raised Jesus from the dead is dwelling within you, He Who raised Christ from the dead will also quicken your mortal bodies because of His Spirit that dwells within you. So then, brethren, we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh; because if you are living according to the flesh, you shall die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you shall live. For **as many as are led by the Spirit of God**, these are the sons of God."

A true Christian is one who is *led* by the Spirit of God. In order to grow in that Spirit, which is needed to obey God and grow more like Him, a true Christian draws on the Holy Spirit through regular prayer and Bible study and occasional fasting. Christ taught His disciples to pray (Matt 6:5-15; Luke 18:1-14) and set an example by beginning each day with prayer (Mark 1:35). The Bible is the "God-breathed" words of God (II Tim. 3:16; I Pet. 1:11-12), and is also a powerful source of God's Spirit. Concerning the very words which He spoke, Christ said "they are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). He also taught the right approach to fasting (Matt. 6:16-18).

One might ask, "How does *faith* fit into all of this?" In the 11th chapter of Hebrews (often called the "faith chapter"), we find example after example of those who "by faith" performed something that God had commanded. In each case, those who were faithful demonstrated their faith by obedience to God. Clearly, **faith and obedience go hand in hand** (Heb. 11:7-38; Rev. 14:12). To think they are somehow at odds with one another is a gross error. A true Christian's faith will show in what he or she does (James 2:17-18, 26). It was Abraham's *obedience* to God, by faith, that made him "the father of the faithful" (James 2:21-24). When Christ returns, He will bring His reward with Him and render to each person "according as his *work* shall be" (Rev. 22:12).

Finally, a true Christian will fellowship with others of like mind when possible—again following the example of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:21; Heb. 10:25). By fellowshipping with one another, Christians also fellowship with God (I John 1:3)—thus strengthening their relationship with God and growing in His Way. A true Christian demonstrates his or her love for one another by serving and giving materially to those in need (Matt. 25:31-46; I John 3:17, 18)—as well as by praying for and encouraging one another (James 5:16). All of these are expressions of the true love of God.

This, then, is the *Bible* description of a *true* Christian—one who, through God's grace, has turned from a life of sin and death to a life of love, obedience and the good works of faith as led and empowered by God's Holy Spirit.