

Can a Christian Go to Hell?

Matthew 7: 21

Once a pastor was invited back by his former congregation to speak for an anniversary celebration. A dear old lady came up to him and said, "**And, of course, you know about my dear husband, Albert. Since you left, dear Albert died and has gone to heaven.**"

Since he vaguely remembered Albert as one whose moral life left much to be desired, he replied, "**Oh, so Albert died and went to heaven? Well, I must say I'm glad.**"

Since this remark was not too well received, he tried to recover by saying, "**What I meant to say was 'I'm sorry!'**"

This did not help the widow. He tried one more time, "**What I really meant to say was, 'I'm surprised!'**"

If as a Christian you land in heaven, will you be surprised?

When a new pastor came to town, someone said, "**I certainly hope that you're not one of these narrow-minded ministers who think that only the members of their congregation are going to heaven.**"

He replied, "**I'm even more narrow-minded than that! I'm pretty sure that some of the members of my congregation are not going to make it!**"

In our text Jesus is saying that if you and I do not put your faith into practice, we will be surprised to find ourselves in hell. Just because you and I are members of a church does not guarantee entrance into heaven.

In many churches today there is a performance gap. They have faith without works, words without deeds, profession without performance. Today's Gospel lesson comes as a conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. According to our text, the Christian who does the will of God will go to heaven, and the one content with "**Lord, Lord**" does not stand a chance.

To Hell You Go! Do not pass GO, do not collect two hundred dollars!

1. The “word-only Christian”, Jesus says, will not go to heaven. **“Not every one who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven.”** It is not because Christ wants to be mean and exclude anyone. No, it is the desire of God that every single soul should go to heaven to live with him through eternity. If we do not make it to heaven, it will be because we excluded ourselves by our lack of faith. Some people make believe without really believing.

They say one thing and do another. In the words of my Grandmother Kimler, **“I can’t hear what you are saying for what you are doing.”** Our lives do not correspond to our faith. This makes us hypocrites, actors, make-believers. Some fall on their knees on Sundays and fall upon their neighbors the rest of the week.

When we are inconsistent, we are fooling no one but ourselves, least of all, God. He sees through the emptiness of our phrases, **“Lord, Lord”**, when we do nothing to serve or obey him.

Jesus said, ***“Inasmuch as you have not done it to one of the least of these my brethren you have not done it to me ... Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food ...”***

In Romans 2 Paul says, ***“He will render to every man according to his works ... for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury”.***

NOTE: Our eternal destiny depends not on our words alone but also on our works.

2. The “word-only Christian” is excluded because they discredit Christianity and the church.

At a country crossroads there were only a few buildings: a school, a church, and a country store. The owner of the store was the lay leader of the church. He was so pious that after each sale as he rang up the price on the cash register he would quote a verse of Scripture. When someone bought a loaf of bread, he would say as he rang up the price, **“Man shall not live by bread alone.”**

One day a stranger came in to buy a saddle blanket. In the store several old cronies were sitting on barrels, chatting and smoking. They overheard the stranger ask for a blanket. They all knew that the store had but one quality of blanket selling for \$10.95. The merchant showed him a yellow blanket and said it was \$10.95. The man asked if he did not have a better one. The merchant pulled

out a blue blanket and said it was \$15.95. The customer said he had a fine horse and wanted only the best for him. Did he have a better blanket? The merchant brought out a red one and said the price was \$20.95. The sale was completed and the spectators wondered what Bible verse he would now say as he rang up the price. With much dignity, the church leader quoted, **"He was a stranger and I took him in"**.

Can you not imagine the disgust on the part of the other men toward the merchant's church and their religion?

They probably said in their hearts that:

They're praising God on Sunday.

They'll be all right on Monday.

It's just a little habit they acquired.

It is only when we live our faith that others are attracted to our church. There was a missionary who addressed a group of Hindu women. While he was talking, one left but soon returned and listened with greater intensity. After the meeting, he asked her why she left. She explained, **"I was so interested in the wonderful things you were saying about Christ that I wanted to ask your servant if you live like you teach. He said that you did and I came back to hear more about your Jesus."**

3. The "word-only Christian" is excluded because they offend God. In Isaiah God says, ***"I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates ... even though you make many prayers, I will not listen."***

Luther once said **"Perhaps God would rather hear the cries of the ungodly than the hallelujahs of the self-righteous."**

Though we are pious and say our prayers, though we go regularly to church and sing our alleluias, though we faithfully place even a tithe on the offering plate, and stop there without making effort to put our faith into practice, God is hurt and offended and grieved no end. He detests make-believe and artificiality.

4. Can the Will of God Be Done?

Now we have seen that our text of Jesus' words tells us who will **not** go to heaven even if they are "**Christians**" who say, "**Lord, Lord**". The text goes on to tell us which Christians **will** enter the kingdom of God: "*... he who does the will of my Father in heaven*".

It is not the "**word only Christian**" but the "**word & works Christian**" that goes to heaven. It is the believer who puts their faith into action. This is a Hard Saying! Who then can enter the Kingdom, for who really practices their Christianity as they should? How can we church members do the will of God as Jesus demands?

It can be done not by doing but by being a Christian. A youth once asked a friend, "**What can I do, man?**" the other replied, "**Don't do, man. Be.**"

Many of us make the mistake of thinking that we can obey the Lord's commands by getting busy and trying harder and harder to shape up to what God expects of us. This is nothing more than self-salvation, works-righteousness. We think that we can get to heaven on our own efforts in moral endeavors. That is the big mistake. Doing flows out of being. We must first be godly before we can act in a godly manner.

This points us to the core of one's being, the heart, the nature of a person. The reason we do nothing or the wrong things is due to the fact that our hearts are not right. We are not rooted and grounded in Christ. We act according to what we are.

During the time of accepted slavery, a northern visitor in New Orleans was watching slaves working spiritlessly and dragging themselves along. But one, in striking contrast, worked with his head erect and with an unbroken spirit. The visitor remarked, "**Who is that fellow? Is he the straw boss or the owner of the slaves?**"

"**No**", came the reply, "**That fellow just can't get it out of his head that he is the son of a king**". Because he was a prince, he acted like a prince even in slavery.

You and I need to remember that **WE** are a prince or princes, a child of the King.

If we church members are not living and serving as we should, it means that we are in need of a change of heart. Obedience to the will of God is not in works but in faith. That sounds contradictory, doesn't it? To get faith, we need more than a shallow "belief". About ninety-five percent of the American people claim they believe in God but not all these have faith.

A college coed once said, **"Sure I believe in God; I'm just not nuts about him."**

That kind of faith will not produce love in action or obey God's commands. The faith that results in follow through is a faith like that of David when he went out to fight the giant, Goliath. He put his whole trust in God and the result was a fearless facing of the giant. Gideon had a faith that obeyed God's orders to defeat an army of tens of thousands with ONLY three hundred men. The truth is: we do or give according to what we our actions demonstrate.

You and I can get to heaven by doing the will of the Father if we will not love man but love God. That sounds foolish, too, doesn't it? It seems we have been talking about loving our neighbor by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and so on. That is true, but we forget what will lead us love our fellowmen. It is not a matter of deciding to love people but deciding to love God. Love of God must come first. Jesus said that the first commandment, is to love the LORD your God with your whole person, and **then** you are love your neighbor, that is the second commandment. ***"We love him because he first loved us."*** Our love is a response to the love of God experienced in Christ. First there is the vertical dimension of love - love of God in response to God's prior love. Then there is the horizontal dimension of love - love for each other as a response to our love for God.

Pastor Larry Smith

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