



HOW DO I KNOW I AM REALLY SAVED?

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
October 29 -30, 2011

No. 1: Hot Potatoes
Scripture: 1 John 5:1-13

Before we look at God's word today I will lead us in a prayer that John Calvin gave at the beginning of his lectures in Geneva.

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of his heavenly wisdom with increasing devotion to his glory and our edification. AMEN

Some of you know that in my misspent youth I appeared on a TV game show in Hollywood. In case you missed this low point of television history here it is.

SHOW HOT POTATO VIDEO

The marvelous thing about the Christian life is that no experience is wasted when we give it to God.

Even my youthful folly has turned out for good as it has given birth to our new series call **HOT POTATOES**.

The idea came to me when I was pondering what to do between now and our Christmas services.

There are four weekends separated by the two weeks of our Missions Festival.

It struck me this provides a good opportunity to handle some of the hot potatoes that people toss to me.

One of the joys of being a pastor is fielding questions about the Christian faith from the congregation and the community. I welcome these because God has given us a mind and he wants us to worship him with our full understanding.

Christians should never run from questions, even when they are difficult and may not have answers.

Much of our faith is mystery. Yet having said that, there are solutions to many problems.

So for the past two weeks I have been reflecting on the most frequently asked questions I have received in the 35 years I have been a pastor.

It was an unscientific survey based on memory rather than data but here are the top four:

How Do I Know I Am Really Saved?

What About Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel?

Does God Still Speak to Us Today?

Can I Lose My Salvation?

People sometimes word these questions differently but they all express a desire to understand how God works in our lives and in the world.

Today we begin with **HOW DO I KNOW I AM REALLY SAVED?**

I think that every Christian ponders this hot potato at some time or another.

It tends to arise at times of crisis.

We wonder why God has permitted this season of suffering. Is it because we don't belong to him?

It is a question on our mind as we face death.

We know that soon we are going to stand before God as our judge. It is going to be a terrifying encounter.

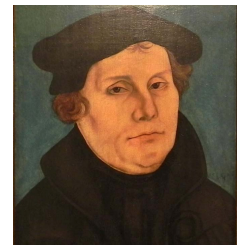
If we don't wonder about the outcome of that interview we are not thinking deeply enough.

This is a particularly appropriate question to ask this on Reformation Sunday as it was a problem that plagued Martin Luther.

He was an Augustinian Monk and a very good one.

He was an outstanding scholar and taught in the seminary.

Yet he had no assurance that he was truly saved.



It wasn't for lack of trying.

To show his commitment to Christ he volunteered to do the most menial tasks in the monastery.

He hurt his health by lying on a cold stone floor all night while crying out to God.

Despite all his efforts Luther had no confidence that he was saved. On the contrary he felt like a condemned man under the judgment of God.

For Luther the defining moment came when he read these liberating words in Galatians chapter 3, **"The righteous will live by faith." (Galatians 3:11)**

Out of that discovery came the Reformation.

Before and since Luther, Christians have been troubled by this question, **how do I know I am really saved?**

The letter of First John was written to answer it.

Some members of the church had left to form their own fellowship claiming that they alone knew the truth.

This left those who remained wondering if their faith was genuine. John tells these Christians that they can be confident that their salvation is real explaining, **"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13)**

The Apostle then gives three proofs of salvation that can either remove our doubt and so give us peace, or confirm our doubts, so we can take steps to make sure our salvation is genuine.

The first is **THE PROOF OF FAITH.**

Faith is essential for salvation, for **"Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6)**

The book of Hebrews gives us the only definition of faith we have in the Bible.

It is, **"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1)**

Those words "sure" and "certain" tell us that it is possible to be absolutely confident about faith.

This is encouraging because scripture tells us it is possible to have a false faith.

Jesus says, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.'" (Matthew 7:21)**

So it is essential we understand the nature of saving faith.

When Martin Luther and John Calvin declared that justification is by faith alone they realized they must explain what that means.

So they taught that faith is made of three parts.

These relate to our whole person: mind, will and heart.

First, **FAITH INVOLVES CONTENT FOR OUR MIND.**

There are certain facts we must know in order to believe.

We are not saved by believing anything.

Some say it doesn't matter what you believe or what religion you have as long as you are sincere.

But the Bible teaches it matters immensely what we believe because we can be sincerely wrong.

So what must we know in order to be saved? After all there is a huge mass of information in the Bible. Are we expected to know all of it?

John tells us that the most crucial piece of knowledge is to understand that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

John expresses this both negatively and positively.

Negative he asks, **"Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. . .no one who denies the Son has the Father."** (1 John 2:22-23)

Then he states it positively, **"Whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."** (1 John 2:23)

So faith starts by hearing the gospel of Christ.

Second **faith includes conviction of the will.**

It is not enough to know the facts about Christ, our will must respond to those facts.

Luther put it this way, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace. It is so sure and certain that a man will stake his life on it a thousand times."

When God calls us to stake our life on Christ he is inviting us to do the most sensible thing we can do.

That is to believe the word of the only being in the universe who is entirely reliable.

That is what John is getting at when he writes,

"We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God."
(1 John 5:9)

Third **faith involves commitment of the heart.**

Calvin's emblem of the Christian faith was a flaming heart offered to God.

It is important we understand the facts about Jesus' cross and the resurrection. It is necessary to believe that they are true and are relevant to our situation.

But saving faith also requires personal commitment.

We turn from trusting in ourselves and instead trust in God.

Our heart needs to be moved. This is what John Wesley meant when he described his conversion in the meeting house in Aldersgate in London.

Listening to a reading of Luther's commentary on Romans, Wesley felt his, "heart strangely warmed."

He described the experience in these words. "I felt . . . I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."

So said the Reformers, faith is composed of information, intellectual assent and individual trust.

Calvin's famous definition of faith is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promises in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Sometimes a person can hear the facts of the gospel and say "I believe in that" and imagine they are saved but they are not. On other times a person will see a movie like *The Passion of Christ* and they will be deeply moved. Their emotions are stirred. They may even weep and they imagine that is faith but it is not. All three elements need to be present.



Now comes the all important question.
Are we trusting in Christ alone for our salvation?
If so we can know that we are truly saved.

Second John points us to the **PROOF OF TRANSFORMATION.**

The Bible says that if we are in Christ we are a new creation. There will be a difference in the way we live. Simply put those who know God will increasingly live righteous lives. This doesn't mean we will be sinless but we will be moving in a direction marked out by the righteousness of God.

John puts it this way, **"The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."**
(1 John 2:4-6)

About a month ago I was talking to a fellow and we discovered we had a mutual acquaintance.

This friend surprised me when he asked, "Did you know our mutual acquaintance is a believer?"

I asked, "Are you sure?" He replied, "O yes, he prayed to receive Christ five years ago."

I inquired, "Does he belong to a church and have fellowship with other believers?"

"No."

"Is he in a Bible study or read the word?" "No."

"Has there ever been a change in his behavior." "No."

"So why do say he is a believer?"

I have no doubt the man prayed.

Knowing the personality of my friend this acquaintance probably prayed to get him off his back.

But this was not saving faith.

There has been no transformation whatsoever and it is a very dangerous thing to tell a person they are a Christian when they are still dead in their sins.

If salvation does anything for us it makes a difference.
If no evidence is found we really have to ask if we are truly saved.

John tells us that Jesus, **"Appeared so that he might take away our sins."**
(1 John 3:5)

That is a definite promise.

If Jesus is our Savior he will save us from specific sins.

If we have been a Christian for awhile we should be able to identify what those sins are.

It is a good spiritual exercise to reflect on what Christ has saved us from and be able to praise him and say,
"Thank you, Lord Jesus, for saving me from anger, for saving me from worry, and saving me from lying."

These are evidence that we are saved.

It doesn't mean that we don't struggle and we may occasionally fall back into a bad habit but there is proof of transformation.

John describes this glorious truth, **"No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him."**
(1 John 3:6)

The Reformers put it like this, **"We are justified by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone."**

There is a fascinating passage in Ephesians 2 which explains the relationship between faith and works.

Paul writes, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

There is a striking repetition of the word "works" in that passage. The first mention of "works" is negative.

It tells us that because we have been saved by grace through faith we are not saved by works.

Otherwise it would be possible for a saved person to boast over another person who did not do these works and therefore was not saved.

Paul here is utterly repudiating works as contributing in any measure to our justification.

If we think works have a part to play in our justification we are trusting in those works rather than in what Christ has done on the cross.

If that is the case, we are justified, for we cannot be saved by grace and works at the same time.

On the other hand no sooner has Paul rejected the role of works in justification than he immediately brings works again saying that God has created us precisely "for good works." His point is that if there are no works then that person is not justified.

Paul is not contradicting himself. He is telling us that God justifies us solely by God's grace and then he regenerates us and gives us a new life and a new start. In the power of that new life we are able to accomplish good works for God.

So let us ask ourselves is there proof of transformation in our lives? God guarantees there will be. If we can see it or someone else can see it we are really saved.

Third John points us to **THE PROOF OF LOVE.**

Salvation produces a change in our relationships both with God and with other people.

We develop a new love for God and for other.

There is an intriguing difference between a statement John makes in his gospel and a statement he makes in his first letter.

In his gospel he writes, **"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** (John 13:34-35)

In other words love is the mark by which the world can know that Christians truly are Christians.

In First John the command is repeated but with a difference, **"We should love one another . . . we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers."** (1 John 3:11 & 14)

Here we see that it is by love that Christians can know that they are Christians.

Some people are impossible to love.

So when we find ourselves loving them we know that this is a result of supernatural activity.

This is the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in our life.

In this letter John tells us that the devil is a liar and that he will come and accuse us and tell us that we do not belong to Christ. This can be tremendously upsetting.

It can lead us to despair.
 We may pull away from Christian fellowship.
 We may stop praying.
 It is a very serious, spiritual condition.

So John writes this letter to give us hope.
 He tells us not to listen to Satan but to listen to the Savior who invites us to believe in him.

Now I recognize that the problem with a message like this is that we filter it through our temperament.
 Some of us by nature are optimistic and hopeful.
 We have no problem believing that we are the objects of God's love and grace. We are sure of our salvation.

But it is quite different for a depressed person.
 We find it hard to think that anyone would love us.
 We are very much aware of our own imperfections.
 It is easy for us to believe the devil's lies that we are no good and that God would never save us.
 If that is our situation we may need another believe to help us see the truth about ourselves.
 Are we really saved?
 Let's apply the tests of salvation.
 Have we trusted Christ?
 If so, God says we are his.
 Do we see evidence of sanctification, even although it may be modest?
 If so, God says we are his.

Do we love others and feel compassion for them?
 Not as much as we would like, but there is evidence of it.
 If so, God says our faith is real. We are his.
 We can the devil to go to hell because we are going to heaven.
 We are truly saved by the grace of God.

But perhaps we can't say "yes" to these questions and we don't pass the test of faith.
 Therefore we have no assurance.
 We are missing out on God's forgiveness.
 We do not have the eternal life which Christ came to give.

So we need to correct the situation.
 We need to experience saving faith.
 Listen to this invitation that Jesus makes to you.

He says, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my**

voice, and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)

Do you know the facts of faith?

Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sin and rose that you might have his life?

Then invite him to be your Savior.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Martin Luther did, so did John Wesley.

So did hundreds of people in this church.

And you can too.

Right where you are as we conclude this service, ask Jesus to be your Lord and Savior.

Commit your life to him.

Experience your own reformation.

You will never be the same.