

Trying to Be a Christian

Jim Elliff

I was astounded. I had just explained to a group of nuclear scientists the difference between trying to earn salvation by our own works and trusting Christ for it. I thought that I had made myself exceptionally clear. As I left, however, one man thanked me and remarked, "I guess I just need to try harder to be a Christian." He had missed it completely! Why couldn't he see my point?

He had as much hope of getting to God by his human effort as by a space shuttle. Without the aid of the Holy Spirit and the understanding provided only through the Bible, every man reasons that he must earn God's favor. The Bible does not say that. It teaches that salvation is a gift received only by faith, "not by works, so that no one can boast." Eph. 2:9

It was this truth about salvation that turned the course of human history in 1516 as the Protestant Reformation began. Sola Fide, "faith alone," became the battle cry of the reformers during those revolutionary days. The reformers discovered a truth that had been hidden behind rituals and dogmas for most of society over hundreds of years. But it certainly wasn't new. The ancient patriarch Abraham had learned this transforming truth three thousand years before the Reformation fires ignited.

Abraham discovered that being accepted as righteous before God, (called justification), does not happen by our good works, but through the exact opposite—faith alone. This faith is not in what we do for Him, but in what Christ has done for us.

"If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works," says Paul, "he has something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" Rom. 4:2-3

If you could be accepted by God on the basis of your works there would be reason to boast. It would mean that you never sin. Since, however, we have never known anybody who is perfect outside of Christ, the "works" way to heaven must be the impossible way. But there is a possible way to be justified—through belief or faith, just like Abraham.

Christ has fully paid the debt of those who are His. When He suffered and died at Calvary, everything was done for man's sin that could be done. This was an act of the greatest possible grace. For you to think that you could be accepted by your own efforts at being good makes light of the cross of Christ. Paul said, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" Gal. 2:21



If you will ever be justified or accepted as righteous before God, then you will have to come God's way, through faith in Christ and what He has done for you. "Trying to be a Christian" is an insult to God and is a way of despising what Christ has done on the cross.

Friends of mine watched a catastrophic event from a hill just above the Guadalupe River in Texas. A bus full of high school students had just come off the hill in order to cross the bridge below. Because of rains upstream, the bridge was covered with water, but the driver thought he could make it over easily enough. Just as they were half-way across, however, a wall of water slammed into the side of the bus and toppled it over into the pounding river.

Soon the students were attempting to maneuver out of the submerged bus. Some made it; others did not. Those who got out were swiftly carried downstream, attempting to hang on to the rocks wherever they could get a hold. They would not last long.

Helicopters from a San Antonio military base were almost immediately on the scene. A line from the helicopter was fastened around the students making it possible for them to be lifted up and over to dry land some distance away.

One girl was nearly insane with fear. When the soldier got to her, it was only with the greatest difficulty that he was able to get the harness around her. As she was being lifted up into the air, high above the ground, her arms were flailing wildly—so wildly, in fact, that she slipped loose from the harness. My friends watched as she plunged to her death below.

Had she only trusted, she could have been saved.

God will never reward the self-effort you exert to save yourself. He will not let you make the cross a meaningless act. He will not obligate Himself to save you because you do what you believe are good works. But there is a *possible* way because of Christ—the way of faith.

"Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Rom. 4:4-5

This article is adapted from a chapter of the new book, *Pursuing God—A Seeker's Guide*, by Jim Elliff. Order for yourself and others at the address below, or online at

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