

## **Common Questions about Lordship, Part 1**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: QA187

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Within days after the initial publication of *The Gospel According to Jesus*, I began to receive mail from readers. In the first few weeks alone I answered more letters about this book than I had ever received on any other subject. In the years since, my staff and I continue to respond to similar comments and questions. Here are some responses that represent the issues most commonly raised:

**Question:** Does the lordship view teach salvation by works?

No, absolutely not. God grants repentance (2 Tim. 2:25) when He changes the heart at the moment of regeneration (Titus 3:5-7), and makes the sinner into a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). We are not saved by works (Eph. 2:8-9), but we are saved unto good works (Eph. 2:10). We are freed from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2) and made slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:22). Works (meaning "acts of obedience") are not a precondition for salvation. But they do characterize the lives of those who have been genuinely saved (Rom. 8:5-9).

**Question:** If your view of salvation is correct, how can we lead people to Christ and offer them immediate assurance? You seem to be saying that people need to seek assurance in their works.

First of all, I do not believe it is the task of the evangelist to "offer assurance." That is the Holy Spirit's work: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

Having said that, however, I do believe there is an immediate aspect to assurance, grounded in the promises of the gospel. How did the thief on the cross know he was saved? He had the Lord's own promise. We find many promises in Scripture that assure believers of their eternal destiny (e.g., John 3:16; 1 John 5:1). Those promises offer objective assurance to genuine believers. Even a brand-new believer can look to such promises and find a measure of assurance.

Other Scripture passages speak of subjective means of assurance. For example, 1 John 2:3 says, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." This aspect of assurance grows and deepens as one walks consistently with the Lord. And Christians who persist in sin for a time forfeit this aspect of assurance for as long as they are grieving the Holy Spirit.

Both the objective and subjective means of assurance are spoken of in Romans 15:4: "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance [subjective] and the encouragement of the Scriptures [objective] we might have hope."

Also it is important to understand what Scripture is teaching about subjective assurance. It is not that we seek assurance in our works, but that we gain assurance from sensing the Spirit's work in us. Again, it is the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

We do not gain assurance by convincing our intellect that we are saved. True assurance is not an academic issue. There are no formulas that can bring it about. It is an important part of the lifelong growth process of the Christian life.

**Question:** You acknowledge that believers can and do sin for extended periods of time. How can such people know whether their sin is a temporary failure or proof that they are unsaved?

Obviously even in Scripture we see that believers sometimes sinned grievously and over long periods of time. David is one example (2 Sam. 11-12; Ps. 51); Lot is another (2 Peter 2:7-9). Christians who sin in such a fashion should not expect to enjoy assurance, however. Of course, true believers do not lose their salvation when they sin (cf. Rom. 8:35-39), but even David testified that he had forfeited the joy of salvation (Ps. 51:12).

When believers sin, they dishonor Christ (1 Cor. 6:15-17), they grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), and they subject themselves to the discipline of a loving Father (Heb. 12:5-7). If they can continue in sin without experiencing divine discipline, something is terribly wrong, as verse 8 explains: "If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

Moreover, our Lord established a process for dealing with sin among believers:

If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst (Matt. 18:15-20).

Notice that the discipline process Jesus outlined is specifically intended to answer the question of whether a person in sin is a true brother or an outsider. "If he listens to you [if he repents], you have

won your brother" (v. 15). But ultimately, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (v. 17)--that is, regard him as an unbeliever and pursue him evangelistically. The Lord goes on to state that he personally mediates his rule on earth through this process (v. 20).

No one who persists in willful, deliberate sin and rebellion against the Lord should be encouraged with any promise of assurance. If you know someone like that who professes faith in Christ, follow the process of Matthew 18 and call that person to repentance. But do not encourage him or her with the promise of security. Such a person may be clinging to a false hope.

**Question:** I love Christ, but I struggle constantly with sin in my life. Should I doubt my salvation?

No. The perpetual struggle with sin was even Paul's experience (Rom. 7:7-25). All of us struggle continually with sinful thoughts, sinful attitudes, sinful habits, and sinful desires. It is those who do not struggle--those who deliberately and eagerly revel in their sin--who need to have their false sense of security shaken.

**Question:** Where in the Bible is it taught that all believers will be spiritually fruitful? Does this mean there is no room for failure in the Christian life?

Of course we all experience some degree of failure, but ultimate failure--returning permanently to unbelief and wanton sin--is not possible for true Christians. Romans 8:29-30 guarantees that every believer will be ultimately conformed to the image of Christ. The Spirit of God indwells each believer (Rom. 8:9). We have been made completely new (2 Cor. 5:17). And we are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Each of those truths guarantees that we cannot experience ultimate failure.

The inevitability of fruit-bearing is repeatedly emphasized in Scripture. The basic principle of creation, stated in Genesis 1:11, is that everything bears fruit of its own kind. Here are just a few verses that expressly underscore this truth:

**Proverbs 12:12**--"The wicked desires the booty of evil men, but the root of the righteous yields fruit."

**Jeremiah 17:7-8**--"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit."

**Matthew 3:10**--"Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

**Matthew 7:17-19**--"Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

**Matthew 12:33**--"Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit."

**Matthew 13:23**--"And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

**Luke 6:43-44**--"For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush."

**John 15:5**--"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing."

**Romans 7:4**--"Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God."

One reader cited the thief on the cross as an exception to this rule. But that thief bore more fruit in a few minutes than many churchgoers bear in an entire lifetime. His repentance was manifested by a striking change in behavior. He did count the cost; he acknowledged that his cross was just and deserved. And he did bow to Christ's lordship; "Lord" is how he addressed the Savior. That dying thief was no example of inactive, fruitless faith.

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