

How Can I Know?

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[0:00] 1 John chapter 5, verses 13 through 21. Page 1023.

John writes these words. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

And this is the confidence that we have toward him. That if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will give him life. To those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death.

I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is a sin that does not lead to death. We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning.

[1:09] But he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God. We know that we are from God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

And we know that the Son of God has come and given us understanding so that we may know who is true, and we are in him who is true, and we are in him who is true, and his Son, Jesus Christ.

He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

The question we want to ask and answer this evening is as follows. How can I know that I'm a Christian?

How can I know that I'm a Christian? Last time we looked at how can I become a Christian. Tonight we want to ask, how can I know that I'm a Christian?

[2:12] In chemistry, a field I know, I suppose, relatively well, there's a type of compound called an indicator. Certain indicators, the best known of all, of course, is phenolphthalein, can tell you whether a liquid is an acid or an alkali.

What are the indicators we can use which can tell us whether we are Christians or not? This is a matter of supreme importance to us.

It's literally the difference between life and death. And it's also a matter of deep trauma for many Christians. They've been given the wrong measures to test the sincerity of their faith.

Some don't think they are Christians who really are. Others think they are Christians when they really aren't. But if you use the wrong indicators, you're going to end up with the wrong answers, and that's tragic.

Let me begin by giving you six measures or indicators which are absolutely wrong. Six indicators of being a Christian which are utterly false.

[3:27] The first is to point to an exact time when you became a Christian. The ability to point to an exact time when you became a Christian.

Some of us can. I can. But many of us can't. That doesn't make us any more or less Christian than anyone else. It's not about an exact time.

It's about whether we're Christians now. In fact, ideally, none of us should know when we become Christians. We've just always been that way. The second wrong indicator is having prayed a prayer of commitment.

Having prayed a prayer of commitment. Last time we prayed a prayer of commitment together. But becoming a Christian is not about words. It's about the faith and sincerity behind those words.

Saying a series of words is neither here nor there to someone being a Christian. The third is living a morally upright life.

[4:32] Living a morally upright life. I'd like to think that everyone here lives a morally upright life. But so do most non-Christians.

Some non-Christians put us to shame by how moral, self-giving, and loving they are. Being a decent person does not make you a Christian.

The fourth, and listen to this one. The fourth wrong measure of whether you're a Christian is your feelings. Your feelings. Sometimes, as a Christian, you might feel on top of the world.

I have a Savior. I know that God loves me deeply. I have the hope of eternal life burning in my heart. But other times, as a Christian, you feel like you're in the depths.

You feel depressed, confused, and lost. Feelings are not a measure of you being a Christian or not. Your feelings can be influenced by anything.

[5:39] The football scores. What you had for dinner last night. How well you slept last night. Feelings don't have any impact at all upon your assurance of faith.

The fifth is being brought up in a Christian home. It's a wrong indicator. Being brought up in a Christian home. Just because we're brought up in a Christian home does not mean to say we are Christians.

Just because our parents chose not to brush their teeth doesn't mean to say that we don't brush our teeth. As we know, to our considerable hurt, many people brought up in Christian homes do not press on to accept the faith of their parents.

Being brought up in a Christian country makes even less of a difference. And then the sixth wrong measure of being a Christian. There are far more than these, but I'm just picking these six.

The sixth wrong measure of being a Christian is coming to church. Coming to church. Over the centuries, billions of people have come to church every Sunday and not believed a word of what was being said.

[6:47] Because for them, coming to church was a status symbol or simply a way of fitting in with their community. As the singer Keith Green once said, going to McDonald's doesn't make you a hamburger.

Going to church doesn't make you a Christian. Now, all these things are good. It's good to know when we became Christians. It's good to have committed ourselves to Jesus by prayer.

It's good to live a morally upright life. It's good to feel like a Christian. It's good to have been brought up in a Christian home. And it's good to come to church. But none of these things are surefire tests or indicators of whether we are Christians or not.

So, if these aren't markers, what are? Before we answer that question, just let me say one more thing. When I was growing up, many older folk in the free church thought it was a sign of presumption to be sure of your faith in Jesus.

The really holy people in the free church. The really holy people in the church were those who were unsure whether they were Christians or not. To lack assurance was virtuous.

[8:04] To have assurance was presumptuous. Now, all I can say is that while many of these older folk were very godly people, and it may have been our tradition, they were absolutely, utterly, and totally wrong.

God wants us to be assured of our faith. He wants us to know whether we are Christians or not. Well, one of the functions of the letter to 1 John is this question.

How do I know I'm a Christian? John's writing to a church troubled with false teaching. It was a matter of extreme importance to John that Christians in that church should know what it means to be a Christian.

And how they can know they are Christians. The false teachers were making other things indicators of being Christians. Things like mystical experiences.

Speaking in tongues. Secret knowledge. For that reason, among others, the apostle John lays down three tests, measures, or indicators of true faith in Jesus for us.

[9:29] The test of truth. The test of obedience. And the test of love. Truth, obedience, and love. How do I know I'm a Christian?

It's not complicated. It's a matter of exploring these three marks. Truth, obedience, and love.

All of them ultimately aren't a call to morbid introspection. They're a call to calm, Bible-centered self-examination. Usually with a friend by your side.

So, first of all then, the test of truth. The test of truth. The question is this. What do you believe about who Jesus is and why Jesus came?

What do you believe about who Jesus is and why Jesus came? By definition, Christianity is all about Christ. By definition, Christianity is all about Christ and Christians bear his name. We are

followers of Christ.

[10 : 31] To believe the wrong things about Jesus is to deny him. To believe the right things about Jesus is to honor him. Our call is to believe the truth about who Jesus is and why Jesus came.

Now, for some reason, Glasgow is awash at the moment with Mormon missionaries. And they try to convince you. They're laughing down here in the front because we know it's true. I was sitting in a coffee shop on the south side the other day, and two of them walked past.

And I know there's loads of them in Byers Road and everywhere else in Glasgow. They try to convince you that they are Christians. But for as much as they try to insist that they are, they are not.

Because they believe the wrong things about Jesus. They fail the test of truth. The same is true for all the other cults like the Jehovah Witnesses and, yes, even the Muslims.

For all their pure livings and religious devotion, they are not Christians because by believing the wrong things about Jesus, they deny him and dishonor him.

[11 : 42] Now, there are many passages in 1 John which provide the grounds for this test of truth. In chapter 2 and verses 18 to 27.

John speaks about the coming of the Antichrist.

Describing how he will deny that Jesus is the Christ. The Antichrist will come. Who is the liar but he who denies?

Verse 22. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist. He who denies the Father and the Son. Notice the Antichrist here has no problems talking about Jesus.

The Antichrist might even insist that we believe in Jesus. But he does not believe that Jesus is the Christ. The Antichrist and his followers depart from apostolic biblical teaching on who Jesus is.

[12 : 56] And John says of them, they're liars. Because they do not believe Jesus is the Christ. And in doing so, they deny both the Sonship of Christ and by definition the Fatherhood of God.

Because for them, Jesus is not the Christ of God, the eternal Son of God. They do not believe the Bible's teaching on the nature of God as being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.

They try to deceive us by telling us that Jesus is not the Son of God in the way he's presented in the Bible. The Son of God bearing the essential nature of God himself.

They try to tell us that Jesus is some kind of created being, an archangel, but not God the Son.

Now, Jesus himself presented himself in this way, claiming that he was the Christ of God, God's Son, who is exactly of the same nature as God himself.

So, to deny that, the essential divinity of Christ is to fail the first test of truth. We know that in our world today, many billions of people claim to worship God.

[14 : 18] But the God we Christians worship is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. If a person calls themselves a Christian, but fails to worship God as he presents himself to us in the Bible, they are worshiping a different God and by definition are not Christians.

Now, I'm five feet ten inches tall, and I have receding fair hair, and I'm of kind of normal build.

If someone claims, oh yes, I know Colin Dow really, really well, he's a midget, and he's got black hair, and he's seriously obese. It's clear they don't really know me at all, right?

In the same way, if someone claims to know God, but believes he is different from who he really is, it's not the Christian God they know. But secondly, or the second test of truth is in 1 John chapter 4, verses 1 through 3.

In 1 John 4, verses 1 through 3, the Apostle John presents us with the second test of truth. He calls us to test the spirits to be discerning.

[15 : 39] He explains in verse 2, By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the Spirit of the Antichrist. The particular type of false teaching against which John was writing denied that Jesus was flesh and bone human being.

Rather, he was some kind of disembodied spirit who only appeared to be human. John insists, rather, that true Christianity consists in believing that Jesus came in the flesh.

Or to use the language of the Apostles' Creed, we recite communion time, He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified and buried.

In other words, all those great moments in the life of Christ were experienced by Jesus, who was flesh and blood just like us. As John wrote in his Gospel, The Word became flesh and dwelt among

us.

[16:53] If Jesus had not been flesh, He would not have been able to suffer for us and die as our substitute on the cross. He would not have risen again on the third day.

And His ascension to the heavenly places would have no meaning for us. Now, John's not saying we have to understand these things perfectly. But believe them we must.

The test of truth is this. We believe in who Jesus is, the eternal Son of God. And we believe in what Jesus has done, took flesh, suffered and died for us.

He is God, made incarnate, who through His suffering, death and resurrection, has saved the people for Himself. Now, you may not feel anything when you hear that from my lips.

You may not feel anything. You may not feel happy or sad or anything. You may not feel happy or sad or anything. This is the test of truth. You believe what Jesus says about who He is and why He came.

[18:00] You may not be able to point to an exact time or place when you began to believe that, but you believe it now. What Jesus says about who He is and why He came.

This is the first test of your Christianity and what you believe to be true. If you believe these things to be true, you have passed the first test of a genuine Christian faith.

The test of truth. Second, the test of obedience. The test of obedience. The question is this. How does what I believe change the way I live?

How does what I believe change the way I live? If what we believe about who Jesus is and why Jesus came makes no difference to the way we live our lives, chances are we don't really believe what we say we do.

Our call as Christians is to live in obedience to Jesus and walk in His footsteps. In the second of his three tests, John wants to explore this issue of the change becoming a Christian makes in our lives.

[19:15] So we're looking here at 1 John chapter 2 and verses 3 through 6. 1 John chapter 2 verses 3 through 6.

Let me read you these words. How can we know we are Christians?

Because our lives are different from what they once were. They're different from what they could have been. How can we know that we have come to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior?

John puts it in three ways in these verses. You just have to look here and you'll see them. We keep His commandments. We keep His word. We walk in the same way He walked.

We know we are Christians when we keep the commandments of Jesus. In John 14, 15, Jesus says, if you love me, keep my commandments. We don't make up the stuff of our own rules and live according to our own code in life.

[20:37] We don't follow Frank Sinatra's pattern of life. I did it my way. We want to follow the commandments of Jesus. And then we keep the word of Jesus.

Verse 4, verse 3 rather. We keep His commandments. The word keep here means to obey, to keep firm, to keep under guard. We're going to imprison the word of Jesus in our hearts and though it may cost us much, we're going to obey it.

When we're tempted to hate those who hurt us, we're going to remember the words of the Lord Jesus when He said, love your enemies. And His words when He said, if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

And then in verse 6, we're going to walk in the same way Jesus walked. We're going to walk in the same way Jesus walked. He walked in love and grace and righteousness.

He resisted the temptations of the devil. He had compassion upon the helpless. He suffered even unto death for us. And we too are being called to walk in love, to show grace and mercy to the needy, and if necessary, to suffer for our faith in Jesus.

[21:52] This is what it means to walk in the same way Jesus walked. And this is the test of obedience, that we are not what we once were.

And because we are grateful for the grace of God demonstrated for us in the cross of Jesus, we cannot be the way we once were. We can't continue living a lifestyle of sin.

It's an impossible thing. One morning on my way into the old St. Vincent Street building, I saw a most disgusting thing. Someone had drunk too much the night before at King Tut's across the road, and had been sick on the pavement.

There was a seagull pecking through the vomit. I don't know what the guy had been eating before he was sick, a doner kebab, I suspect. It was absolutely gross. For the Christian, to live in a sinful

course of life is entirely as disgusting a prospect as joining with that seagull in pecking last night's vomit.

Let me explore a couple of ways, a couple of things which might help us as we explore this test of obedience. The first is by way of exception.

[23:18] There may be many of us who cannot point to an hour or a day where we became Christians. We've always been Christians, so to talk of a dramatic change doesn't really make any sense to us.

We've always wanted to keep Jesus' commandments. We've always wanted to keep his words. We've always wanted to walk in Jesus' way. So don't be discouraged if you're in that category, if you've always been a Christian since you were we.

If you're in that category, John is describing the way you've always been, and that's good, so that's by way of exception. Don't panic if you can't point to any decisive change in your life.

This is the way you are now. The second's by way of encouragement. None of us are perfect. We all sin. Error in his letter, John writes, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

For as long as we live on this earth, we're all going to sin and give in to temptation. But again, John says, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sin.

[24:22] So the measure of our faith is not perfect obedience. It's not sinless obedience, because we all continue to sin.

Be that as it may, the Christian cannot continue in sin. He cannot continue to live a sinful lifestyle. It is impossible for two plus two to equal three.

And it's impossible for a Christian to be content and happy living in a sinful relationship, for example. There will always be an inner conflict within him.

And grace, if he's a Christian, will always win. The third is by way of insight. The question here, really, and I think this is probably the crux of the matter, is one of desire.

Desire. Do you want to be obedient to Christ? Do you want to keep his commandments better? Do you want to walk as Jesus walked and be more like him in your life?

[25:34] Of course, your desires at times will be frustrated by the sin which wars within you. But the desire remains. You want to be pleasing in God's sight.

You don't want to do the wrong thing. You want to do the Christ-like thing. You want to be like Jesus, even if at times you're not like Jesus. So this then is the measure of our Christianity. Perfect perfection, sinless perfection, perfect obedience is way beyond us. But you know, we want to live in a way which pleases our Lord and Master Jesus Christ.

And when it comes to our sin, there's repentance and forgiveness. Because if there wasn't that, we'd all be in trouble. So the test of obedience.

Do you want to be like Jesus? Third, and finally, the test of love. The test of love. Here we are in 1 John chapter 3, and I think we'll look at verse 14.

[26:38] We could choose many. 1 John 3 verse 14. 1 John 3 verse 14. In the starkest of terms, John states, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

We love other Christians. Here's the third indicator of our being Christians, that our attitude to our fellow Christians is one of love. Perhaps we once thought of Christians the same way we thought of everyone else.

Perhaps before we became Christians, we had Christian friends, but we couldn't say that we loved them. But now that we've come to know Christ as Lord, the situation has changed.

We hold other Christians with special affection, whoever they are. We have a special bond with Christians we do not even have with the closest of non-Christian friends.

Christians. We love them. Does that mean to say that we always agree with them? No. Does that mean to say that we always feel the love in terms of warm affection? No.

[27:46] Does it mean it's impossible to hurt each other as Christians? No. But it does mean that underneath it all is the love of Christ for His church and His people. And this may be the hardest, but one of the shooziest measures of the authenticity of our faith in Jesus, that we love other Christians and we put them first.

We refuse to abandon them when they're hurting and lost. We want to forgive others the hurts they have caused us. We want to do good to them.

Going down a couple of verses to verse 16 of 1 John 3. By this we know love that He, Jesus, laid down His life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

We love other Christians. Why? Because Jesus laid down His life for them and He laid down His life for us.

Other Christians are entirely as equal in value as we are in the sight of God. Other Christians are recipients of the mercy of God as surely as you are.

[29:01] There are no grounds for superiority or rank or pride in the kingdom of God because it's by grace we stand, all of us.

We are all children of one heavenly Father. We're all brothers of one crucified Savior and we are all the home of one Holy Spirit.

We are of the blood and we love one another. So, these three, the test of truth, the test of obedience and the test of love are the apostles' indicators of whether we're Christians or not.

As I said, it's not about loving one another perfectly, obeying Christ perfectly or understanding the truth of the gospel perfectly, but even as Jesus said, faith as small as a mustard seed is enough. It is not the strength of our faith in Jesus that saves us. It is the strength of Jesus working through our faith that saves us. I always like to imagine that there are far more people who are Christians than think they are.

[30:21] Now, perhaps you're not quite so good at seeing these things in yourself. Perhaps you're kind of a melancholy person who just doesn't see much good in yourself and you can't really see these marks of grace in your life.

in which case, ask a close Christian friend to help you assess where you are in terms of your belief in the truth of Jesus, your obedience to Jesus, and your love for Jesus' people.

Your friend might help you to make sure that you are using the right indicators and measures for your faith. And if in the course of completing John's three tests of faith, you're still struggling to know whether you're a Christian or not, go back to step one.

We looked at two weeks. And commit yourself again to the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord. A final word of advice.

A bit of experience speaking here after 40 years of being a Christian nearly. Don't get too introspective. Don't get too introspective.

[31:38] Looking within is not always a very good idea. The Christian is called, as Roger told us last week, to look upwards at Jesus and listen to His promises.

And he says, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. That's what John says.

And he says, whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God. That's what the Bible says. Don't listen to your own doubts.

Listen to God's certainties. And may God bless you with a strong assurance of your faith in Jesus. Let us pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the teaching of 1 John. We recognize that there is far more involved in all these things than what we can in the space of a few minutes discussed this evening.

[32:49] And yet, Lord, we pray that you would help us not to overcomplicate things in our minds, but rather to keep to the forefront your promises that whoever confesses that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.

And Lord, we pray for those of us who do lack assurance of faith and wonder whether we are Christians at all. And again, we pray that you would help us not to rely upon our feelings.

Our feelings are so fleeting, and you know what we're like as human beings. Our feelings can be determined by what we ate for lunch or by the football scores or by the weather or by someone driving in a silly way and cutting us up at a junction.

Lord, we ask and pray that you would help us to rely upon your word. And we pray, Lord, that you would help us to serve you our whole lives through, to love one another from the heart deeply, to walk in your ways, Lord Jesus, to keep your word, Lord Jesus, to obey your commandments, Lord Jesus, and to believe the truth about who you are and why you came.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.