Acts 16:25-34 "Can I Be a Christian Even Though I’m Not a (Fill in the Blank)?"

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! We asked last week, how do I follow a Jesus whose followers do so much evil?
And we saw that the Bible's not surprised by the sin of God's people when we don't live like Jesus. Nor does it leave our evil unaddressed. It's not a small thing.
But Jesus provides a unique hope for all who are guilty of evil. In fact, He has promised to right all of the wrongs that we perpetrate.
Today, we're going to look at another question that many ask. It's, can I be a Christian even though I'm not a fill-in-the-blank?
[1:21] There may be lots of different ways that you might fill in that blank. But the idea this morning is to see what's actually at the heart of Christianity.

The identity of a Christian. It may surprise you a little bit. We're going to look at this through a story in Acts chapter 16.
You may want to go ahead and turn there as I'm going to read it for us in a couple of minutes. But first, I want us to pray and ask for God's help as we look at His Word.
Father, would You work this morning by Your Spirit? Would You give us ears to hear even the struggles in our own hearts?
Ears to hear our neighbors who are asking and wondering about You. Most importantly, Father, give us ears to hear right now Your voice.
[2:26] In Your Word, by Your Spirit, might we hear You and be different forever because of it. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Kids, can I have your attention for a second? I want to play a little game as we're getting started this morning. It may not be as exciting as some games that you play, but it's a game, okay? I mean, come on. Here's how it works. I'm going to tell you a word, and then you tell me what that word has to have in order to be that thing.
Okay? It's a little bit confusing. But when I say the word library, what does a library have to have to be a library? Books!
Y'all are so good at this game. That is awesome. A library has to have books. Here's a fancy word. The sine qua non.
[3:27] You got that? It's very, no, it's not important that you remember that. The sine qua non of a library is books. The sine qua non means the thing without which the thing is not what it is.

What's right at the essence, at the heart of what something has to have. So that's the game we're going to play. Let's practice some more. Salad has to have lettuce.
Yeah, there's a lot of other things. Bread has to have... Butter was a great answer. I'm changing my answer, which was flour.
Butter is better. Okay. Good. Let's get back on track. A rainbow has to have... Colors. Yeah. To have a rainbow.
We're going to give your parents a challenge. Democracy. What's the sine qua non of democracy? Taxes. I knew we shouldn't have played a game.
[4:38] You might say elections or freedom or something like that. How about pizza? Cheese.

Yes. I feel like there should also be tomato sauce, but some people make pizza without it. But cheese. Yes. A fish. You got to have water and gills to breathe.

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Very good. A teacher. What does a teacher have to have? A student. A class in order to be a teacher.
Y'all are figuring this out. I want to give you one more in honor of VBS. Rain forest. Rain. Very good answer. And forest.
Yes. You need water and trees. We've got plenty of both. So you remember that this week. It'll make you think of the sine qua non, I'm sure. See, there may be a lot of other things that are often true of a salad or a library or a rainforest.
[5:49] But what is absolutely essential? What does it have to have? Okay, that's what we want to know this morning. What is the sine qua non of a Christian?

See, getting confused here can be really misleading. In the past few years in our country, as things have gotten more and more polarized, I think many Christians have gotten confused themselves.
A few years ago, one pastor who most of you would recognize and respect said any real Christian would vote for Trump.
At the same time, another beloved pastor in our tribe said, if anyone voted for Trump, I question the sincerity of his Christianity.
Wow. Is being a Republican or a Democrat or voting for a particular candidate essential to being a Christian?
[7:06] Another example, many people think that being a good person is the sine qua non of being a Christian. And that includes people on two different sides of this.

There are some who have ruled themselves out of being a Christian because they're not moral enough. How can I be a Christian when I've done the things that I've done?
I can't be a Christian, some would say. And then on the other hand, you have some who, we talked about people like this last week who are saying, actually, Christians aren't actually good people. They're just judgmental enough to think that they are. And so, how can I be a Christian if I'm not judgmental? Ooh, I hope you can.
But specifically, in a recent Barna survey, respondents got to choose from a list of descriptors that they thought fit Christianity.
[8:10] And among young non-Christians, there was one box checked more than any other on the list. By 91% of those people looking at the list, they said what described Christians was anti-homosexual, more than any other descriptor that they could see.

So, you even run into people who say, I can't be a Christian because I don't hate LGBTQ plus people.
I hope we don't hate any people. But is that the sine qua non of being a Christian? Many apparently think so.
There's one more really significant way I've heard people fill in that blank. I'm sure you've said others or you've heard others.
But can I be a Christian even though I'm not a person without doubts or questions? See, their impression is that churches don't welcome doubts or questions.
[9:20] Those are outside the Christian box. In here, we just all know what we know and believe what we believe and we keep it in line. And that is also one of the reasons that we are welcoming these hard questions this summer.

We don't want for that to be excluded. So, we're going to come back to some of these issues briefly throughout the sermon. But what is the sine qua non?
What is a Christian? People answer that question a lot of different ways. But I think the word gives it away and somebody over here already got the answer.
I heard it earlier. It's Christ, right? Without Jesus, you don't have Christianity or Christians.
Let's see what the Bible says about this. Acts 16, it's telling the story of Paul and Silas. The apostle Paul and his co-worker Silas who are traveling to share the good news of Jesus and they've gone to the city of Philippi.
[10:33] They have since been arrested, beaten, thrown in prison, put in really painful, uncomfortable stocks. They're locked up in prison.

And yet, listen to how they respond to suffering. Acts 16 at verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were, what do you think they were doing in prison?
Praying and singing hymns to God. And the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly, there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken and immediately all the

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doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened.
When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, do not harm yourself for we are all here.
And the jailer called for lights and he rushed in and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. And then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?
[11:48] Now just stop there for a minute. Paul has this jailer right where he wants him, right? This is one of those foxhole moments where your life is on the line.

He's going to make a bargain with God, right? I'll do anything to be saved. Rescue me. What do you want me to do? I mean, imagine you're Paul, right?
This is his big chance. You know, what do you want me to do? How about 20% of your next paycheck? How about promise to do anything I want you to do?
Get me a private jet. No. Paul's going to say something else entirely. Verse 31. In response to his question, what must I do to be saved?
They said, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. You and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.
[12:52] And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he was baptized at once. He and all of his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them.

And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. Believed in God when he believed in the Lord Jesus.
That was it. The sine qua non of a Christian is Jesus. Paul keeps it pretty simple, doesn't he?
He says, you're saved by works. Just not your own works. You trust what Jesus has done.
After the simple, clear statement, it says, Paul spoke the word of the Lord to the jailer and his household. What do you think Paul said?
[13:56] We don't know the exact words, but we do know some things about it. We know that it couldn't have taken more than a couple of hours because the earthquake happened around midnight. They were baptized sometime that night.

There must have been so much theology that they still didn't know about or certainly understand.
What else about the word of the Lord that Paul spoke to them?
The word of the Lord. He's just identified the Lord as Jesus. So we know Paul's talking to them about Jesus. If you flip over to 1 Corinthians, Paul tells you where he starts when he talks about Jesus.
What's most important? Paul says, I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received. That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. That he was buried. That he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. And that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.
[14:58] Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Anything in there? Those things of first importance that are commands of things for us to do to get in?

Nope. It's all about what Jesus has done, isn't it? His death, his burial, his resurrection, his appearances. So we trust him.
That's what Paul's saying. This is what Jesus has done so that you can trust him. See, a Christian is someone whose identity comes not from what he has done for God, but for what God has done for him.
Hallelujah. We are who you say we are, God. We are someone who's forgiven of all failings.
Even the very worst ones because of Jesus' sacrifice. We're someone adopted into God's family as a son or a daughter, as an heir of heaven.
[16:04] We're someone indwelt by God's Spirit, regardless of what we've done or will do. So the jailer considered his life over, didn't he? He was done.

He was at the very bottom, as low as he'd ever been personally or professionally, but he was not too far gone for God to save, was he?
Listen, I really don't want you to miss this. If you're someone who came this morning asking that question somewhere in your heart, can I be a Christian even though I'm not a good person?

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If you're feeling some version of that, the answer is absolutely. Absolutely. Jesus is the good person.
Paul didn't ask the jailer here how many times he'd been to church recently. He didn't ask him how he behaved while in college. He didn't ask him if he was a perfect parent.
[17:03] No, he asked him to be willing to trust Jesus as the good person for him. You can do that today. No matter how you've thought of yourself previously or how you worried about yourself coming in, there's Jesus for you.

And that simple clarity is vitally important because in a day where we like to argue and we have a tendency to divide over every little disagreement, we seem to have lost the art of what I'll call theological triage.
Did you know, friends, that the identity of the Savior whose blood rescued us and is pictured in the sacrament of baptism is more important than the amount of water used during the baptism?
It is. I'm not saying it doesn't matter. Both are valid discussions and great conversations to have, but some things are primary while others are secondary.
That Jesus rose from the dead, that he's coming again, primary. The exact timing of his return and the scope of redemptive history and all the things that are going to happen around it, secondary.
[18:29] See, historically, following Paul's biblical example of the things that are of first importance, most heresies, things that would take you outside of Christianity, are wrong beliefs about the person or work of Jesus.

That's at the heart of it. When we fail to triage those issues and imply that all Christians do the same things, vote the same ways, sing the same songs, that makes you a Christian.
See, we understandably confuse the simple and clear gospel message and people get the wrong idea entirely. John Calvin warns against this when he writes about this passage in Acts.
He talks about us wandering from Christ, this simplicity in regard to salvation, to being a Christian. He says when that happens, things get complicated quickly in any number of ways.
It leads to confusion, doesn't it? Because I start to think that every detail of God's word is equally important so you always worry whether there's another theological nuance you need to nail down and you miss Jesus.
[19:55] Southwood, let's never allow an emphasis on secondary issues to cause our neighbors to miss the primary person at the heart of Christianity.

Okay? Let's not do that. It can lead to confusion in that way. It can also lead to arrogance. Right?
How would it lead to arrogance? Well, when I start adding things to the essence of Christianity and I start to give myself credit for being a Christian because I've done some of these things, no way! May I never boast except in Jesus and His cross. It may not lead to arrogance. It may start to lead you to doubt concerning your own salvation.
Because see, if we're honest, once I'm involved in needing to do anything, how can I ever be sure I've done enough, well enough, to be saved?
And we miss Jesus and His promises to hold us and keep us and bring us home. It's the very joy and hope of the gospel.
[21:04] We start to lose it. So Christians are those identified with Jesus. They have a relationship with Him.

Paul says, that relationship means they believe in Him. Jesus was clear on this way that the relationship with Him works, right?
Faith in His works. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life, John 3.
Jesus gets asked in John 6, what do we do to do the works of God? And what does He say? Believe in the one He has sent. He does the works.
Remember? Doubting Thomas touches the resurrected Jesus and believes and we learn that these things were written that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we may have life in His name.
[22:20] That's the secret. Life, full life, abundant life, even everlasting life is not something we achieve but something we receive.

Faith, y'all, is not performing feats of strength but trusting the strong one. your faith right now as you sit there is in the pew to hold you, right?
It's not in your ability to sit well. here Paul says believing in Jesus, trusting what we don't see.

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It's this believing in or the preposition here is actually upon Jesus and I think that's a really helpful image because it pictures that resting, that being held up by Jesus as we're trusting upon Him. Elsewhere, the Bible uses a different preposition believing in or into Jesus. In other words, as we trust Him there's a union, there's a relationship, a connection with Him by faith that the Bible says is all we need.
[23:39] Once we're connected to Him that's what we need. It's at the very heart of Christianity. We believe not in belief. It's not faith in faith or faith in whatever.

Just faith. We believe in Jesus. Now some people who understand that sometimes wonder, can I be a Christian with all my doubts?
A Christian is a person of faith who believes, but some days a passage in the Bible confuses me. Some days being made fun of by my friends makes me question what I believe.
Some days I think I believe but I'm really not sure. I'm actually confused. Friends, listen, I want you to know this. Christians wrestle with doubts.
Pastors wrestle with doubts. Disciples of Jesus wrestled with doubts. And if you think that disqualifies you from being a Christian, let me say to you with all the sympathy in the world, it does not.
[24:59] It does not disqualify you. In fact, I would urge you don't put yourself back at the center again. You're not the hero.

You don't have to be the strong one. The key to faith is not the strength of the believer but the strength of its object.
That pew you're sitting in will hold you up even if you're not always certain that it will. And likewise, Jesus will save you.
You can be even more certain. Even if you're not always feeling certain. that he will. But you believe upon him. British preacher Charles Spurgeon knew doubts well.
And here was his hope. I love this picture. It's a simple one. He says, often doubts will prevail. What a mercy it is that it is not your hold of Christ that saves you but his hold of you.
[26:06] What a sweet fact that it is not how you grasp his hand but his grasp of yours that saves you. So what do you do with your doubts?

Will you take them to Jesus because he can handle them? You might ask a parent or a pastor or a friend your questions about Jesus.
You might go together to the words of Jesus to see what he would say but whatever you feel don't think that it makes you not a Christian.
Jesus makes you a Christian. You can trust him. Well there's one last thing here that Paul includes at the heart of Christianity.
Believe in the Lord Jesus. The Lord means the ruler. the one in charge. The one on the throne.
[27:06] The Jesus we believe in is not one among many. He's not a prophet of our own imagination that we get to make up any way we want him to be.

He's the Lord. So if that's the case who gets knocked off the throne?
Well the most obvious answer here for the Philippian jailer was probably Caesar. He's likely a former Roman soldier who would have been taught Caesar is Lord.
The one to whom he swore his allegiance. So part of what Paul is saying to him is that no human leader, no ruler, no political figure deserves the kind of allegiance that you now give to Jesus.
That's some theological triage in two little words. The Lord. He is the Lord. Jesus is. Jesus, by the way, in case you're confused, never voted Republican or Democrat.
[28:18] Did you know that? Never even voted in an election in the United States of America. Shocking. That is news that you came to receive this morning. Just clarifying, Jesus is Lord, not a position that's up for election.

Be careful of making any other person or group a measuring stick or a litmus test of true spirituality. But I think for many of us, believing in the Lord Jesus is challenging because it takes me off the throne as much as it does Caesar or Trump or anyone else.
Jesus himself says, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.
For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it. Now, this is not a gotcha.

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This is not the catch where you realize, oh, it actually is about whether I do enough good things and be good enough. No, being a Christian is all about Jesus and trusting him.
[29:39] What Jesus is saying here is that once we do, following Jesus, finding our identity in relationship with him means now we start to think about how this changes everything.

He's Lord, not just over one little place, but over everything. Let me let some of you breathe.
Following Jesus should impact how you vote.
it should. As you prayerfully consider how best to honor Jesus as Lord right in the time and place where he has placed you, and as you humbly respect others who reach different conclusions about how to do that.
See, this is actually really hard, but if I'm not on the throne anymore, I submit to Jesus in everything. Even my passionate political convictions. Even the things I'm sure I've got right. Even the things that just seem to make sense to me. I say, Jesus, you're the Lord.
[30:57] What do you want? You show me Jesus. So yes, this is the life of discipleship, of walking with Jesus.

It does mean that Jesus directs everything, including our sexuality. He directs it all according to his design.
And that means that he calls us to repentance over our selfish heterosexual lusts, over our selfish quick divorce mentality, selfish, homosexual behavior.
All of them. It also means that I seek to treat people in process in any of these struggles and many other struggles the way the Lord Jesus would.
I'm supposed to be treating you the way he would. He shows us and tells us how we treat people who are wrestling and struggling, who are still works in process. Jesus was known as the friend of sinners, wasn't he?
[32:09] Even to the consternation of the religious folks, he ate and drank with those people that they avoided, not because he compromised the truth, but because he was full of grace and truth.

So one example of that, since I mentioned it earlier, our reputation about this, this is not all that could be said in this area, but a start.
We hold to clear biblical teaching and historic Christian belief on sexuality. One man, one woman, within the covenant of marriage.
marriage, and we ought to live in such a way that we are known as the friend of sinners, of heterosexual adulterers, as Jesus was, and homosexual sinners too, like our Lord.
If you're wondering, is there a place for you with Jesus? We're not proud of our sin, that's not it, but we are proud of our Savior, and He loves sinners.
[33:22] So if you're wondering if there's a place for you, if you love criminals, if you love homosexuals, if you love addicts, is there a place with Jesus for you?

Even in this church, you better believe it. Yes, there is, because our identity comes not from any of those things that we do, but from what Jesus has done, and who we are as a result of believing in Him.
We go to His Word, and we ask our Lord to direct our steps in truth, to direct our relationships in grace.
Jesus, would you make us known for living, for loving, like you? The sine qua non. believe in the Lord Jesus.
Now as we come to His table, what is the sine qua non for those who would come partake of this table?
[34:33] It's got to be the same, doesn't it? Active belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus. So let me just think with you before we celebrate the Lord's Supper, what does that mean is not required for coming and eating here?

Well, being a member of Southwood, not required. Being a Presbyterian who would do things like have your children baptized, not required.
Having had a good week where you didn't blow it in anything you said or looked at or thought about or did. Even being doubt free in your confused mind that seems right now more full of questions than answers on some things not required.
So what is required? What would it mean to say actively believe in the Lord Jesus? That means that you are placing all of your hope in Him for the failure of this week, for the questions in your mind in the midst of your doubts, that you're trusting His life and death and resurrection in your place, that

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you see here His body and blood given for you to make you His even while you're still in process. You're His. and active belief in the Lord Jesus, if He's your Lord, that means when He shows you an area where you're disobeying Him, that means that you're willing to be displaced from the throne. [36:22] It means that you're willing, you're actually in the process of repenting and turning back to Him. It doesn't mean you're perfect, it does mean that you're not on the throne.

Not anymore. It means you've been baptized to declare that publicly, like the jailer and his family, that there's another Lord and it's not me. It means that you're now a part of a community that works together to hold one another to that active belief in Jesus, like that little church just starting in Philippi whose only hope was in the Lord Jesus.
Like this little church in Huntsville whose only hope is in the Lord Jesus and so we, like them, for now 2,000 years, come to do what Jesus has told us to do in remembrance of Him.
Hear it as He invites you Himself. Was the night He was betrayed that Jesus took bread and He broke it and He gave it to His disciples as I ministering in His name give this bread to you.
He said, take and eat, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And then in the same way He took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.
[37:45] Drink from it all of you. And Paul explains to us, now as often as you eat this bread and you drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

You proclaim that He's Lord and that you're His. Paul goes on to say, examine yourselves as you come to this table so that you don't come here and eat without seeing Jesus and so that if you do see and do celebrate Jesus here, you come humbly and you come hopefully alongside the other parts of His body who are humble and hopeful with you.
Let's pray and then we'll come together. Jesus, we are humble because we know nothing we have done can earn us a seat at this table and we're quite sure that our record would get us chased off if that's what it were based on.
But we come so hopeful because we have a Savior. One who comes for sinners is a friend of sinners, rescues sinners like us so that we become children of God.
And so we joyfully receive the gift of Your presence and the reminder of Your love. We ask this in Jesus' name.
[39:20] Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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