

Losing My Religion

2. Dead Man Walking

February 11-12, 2017

The state just north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil has been struggling with a severe budget shortfall, as the country struggles with the worst recession on record. They haven't had money to pay the police, even though their salaries are already extremely low, so about a week ago last Friday, the police stopped working.

Immediately, a crime wave erupted. Murder increased 650% last week. Citizens with cell phones broadcast videos of chaos as thieves and criminals run rampant. One citizen said, "The thugs are randomly shooting at anyone who passes in the street. My God what is happening?" Schools are closed and many people will not even go outdoors. In the state capital of Vitoria, store windows were smashed as looters took advantage of the lack of law enforcement. Another observer said, "Things are absolutely crazy, there are people running around with guns, dozens of people stealing from malls, even dead bodies on streets."¹ The federal government had to send in the army to restore order.

It is frightening to see what happens when the law enforcement is taken away. If you see a police officer today, thank them for what they do. This is exactly why the Apostle Paul's opponents were concerned with his teaching. They were concerned about spiritual chaos.

The Apostle Paul preached, "We are saved by grace, through *faith*...not by keeping the law." So some Jewish Christians said, "It is dangerous to teach people that we are made right with God by grace through faith and not by keeping the law. If we're saved by grace, what's to keep us from doing evil? Why not just sin, if God will forgive us by grace?"

That's a valid question. Let me summarize Paul's answer, then we'll look at it in more detail. In Galatians 2, Paul basically says, "You don't understand faith... when we have true saving faith, we sin less, not more." The confusion arises because "Faith" is not the same things as "Belief."

"Belief" is just a mental agreement that something is true. To believe is to say, "I believe the sun is 93 million miles from the earth. That's true." To believe is to say, "I believe Jesus rose from the dead." We might agree that is true.

But that is not saving faith. It is a step toward saving faith, but it is not yet saving faith. **Saving Faith = responding to Christ with trust and obedience.**

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4198826/Brazilian-city-s-murder-rate-650-police-strike.html#ixzz4Y6gRYhVb>

Saving faith says, “Jesus rose from the dead, so I am going to trust him with the decisions of my life, and do what he asks me to do.” That’s a step beyond belief. That is faith. We need to know the difference, because we are saved through faith; we are not saved by belief. We are made right with God through faith, we are not made right with God by belief.

In Galatians 2 Paul illustrates what saving faith looks like by pointing to himself. Everyone knew that Paul was a very religious Jew. He kept all the laws better than just about anybody. But then he met the risen Christ, and he realized that keeping ceremonial laws like eating kosher and celebrating feasts doesn’t make us right with God. Only faith does that.

He described what faith looks like by using himself as an example. **Galatians 2:19-20** *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!* That is what faith that saves looks like and I want to break this down today. As your pastor, I want to be faithful and make sure none of us here misses out on friendship and eternity with God because of confusing belief and faith. I want to make sure that no one *thinks* they are right with God only to realize later they are not.

In Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:20 we see two traits of saving faith. First, **faith changes who is in charge**. When have faith in Jesus, we will put Jesus in charge of our lives. Verse 20 puts it this way: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*. To be crucified with Christ means to die to myself, to choose to put my own desires, ambitions and will aside, and I follow what Jesus says.

Paul is saying “I used to call the shots in my life. I did what I thought best, I made my own decisions. Now I don’t do that. Now Jesus guides my actions and attitudes. Paul is doing what Jesus said in **Luke 9:23** *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*

I have spoken with people who say, “I tried God, but it didn’t work for me.” Maybe they were going through a tough time in life and they heard God had the answer, so they prayed a prayer. Or maybe they had an emotional moment when they felt God’s presence, and they realized they wanted God. But they never experienced the love, joy and peace they heard promised; they never really felt the friendship with God. So they walk away and don’t follow Jesus.

They were almost a Christian, but didn’t cross over. The reason is that they never gave God the steering wheel of their lives. They were willing to let Jesus take away some pain, but they weren’t willing take direction from him. That

doesn't work. They were willing to let Jesus be Savior, but not their Lord. Lord means "one in charge." They believed, but they didn't have saving faith, because they were not willing to let Jesus take charge. **Romans 10:9** *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* To declare that Jesus is Lord means to declare that he is in charge of your life.

Everyone who follows Jesus goes through certain stages. We can see these steps in the way Peter became a disciple. Luke 5 describes them. The first step is to **LISTEN to Jesus**. We hear his message.

One day Jesus was teaching the crowds and near the water's edge, and asked Peter to let him stand in his boat while he taught. Peter said, "OK." So, he took Jesus out a ways and listened to Jesus teach. He was an observer. But Peter was still in complete control. Peter let Jesus use his boat, but clearly, it was *Peter's* boat. Peter was interested in what he heard, but that was all.

Maybe that's where you've been; you've been listening to the message of the Gospel. You've heard teaching at church, or someone shared their faith with you. That's great! You're at step one. It's not faith. It's still your boat; your life is yours and you are calling the shots. You are at an important step in the process, though. You can't go to step two without step one.

The second step is to **accept Jesus' help**. Peter listened to the point he believed in Jesus. You can tell because he was willing to take suggestions from Jesus. After Jesus was done teaching, he told Peter to throw the nets in at a certain spot in the water. Peter said, "Master, we already tried that, but because you say so, we'll do it." When Peter threw the nets out, he got a HUGE catch of fish. Amazing! Jesus had given Peter what any fisherman wants: a ton of fish! Peter had started to believe Jesus' teaching was true. He called him "Master." Then he let Jesus bless him and help him. That's step 2: he is willing to accept Jesus' help.

Maybe that describes where you are today with God; you've come to the point where you're willing to admit there might be something to this Jesus stuff. Maybe you have prayed and asked Jesus to help you. Maybe you've even seen an answered prayer. If that's where you are - great - you are on your way! But that is not yet saving faith; you are not yet saved by grace.

The third step of faith is to **accept Jesus' leadership and follow Jesus as Lord**. This is where Peter crosses over the line of faith. After the catch of fish, Peter realizes this Jesus is not an ordinary guy. He says "Go away Lord, I'm a sinful man!" Jesus knows that he's sinful, but says to him, "Follow me" and Peter does. He leaves his boat, his catch of fish, and he follows Jesus. That is the moment he became a disciple. Peter responded with Trust. He didn't know where Jesus was going, but he was going with him. He didn't know exactly what it

meant to be a fisher of people, but he was following. Peter responded with obedience. He was doing what Jesus asked him to do.

Peter wasn't saved by keeping the law or because he was good enough; he knew he was a sinful guy. Peter wasn't saved by leaving his boat, he was saved by faith. His readiness to trust and obey. That faith led him to give up his business. This is the line of faith. Have you crossed it? Have you moved from listening and accepting help to actually yielding your life to Jesus' leadership? Have you left your boat, your control, and your direction behind and followed?

[Justin Wren](#), was an All-American wrestler in college. After college, he moved into the world of MMA or Mixed Martial Arts. He was hugely successful and his popularity skyrocketed. At the same time, Wren's addictions to cocaine, alcohol, and narcotics also skyrocketed. Eventually, his life hit rock bottom when he was kicked off one of the world's best fight teams for drug use. Wren said, "My childhood dream had turned into a living nightmare. But when everyone else had written me off as beyond redemption, one friend, Jeff, refused to walk away. Jeff called me several times a day, inviting me to a Christian men's retreat. I was expecting a bunch of "kumbaya moments" around a campfire, but the men were raw and real about their struggles."

Wren opened his life to Christ and found that he wanted more than MMA fame. He started volunteering at local ministries and prisons, sharing his story with anyone who would listen. He finally prayed this prayer: *God, I'm yours. Is there anything you want me to do? I desire to do your will, not mine.*

God answered his prayer with a vision. Wren saw himself working in the jungles and he saw a Bible passage (Isaiah 58:6-12) about God's heart for the poor and oppressed. Wren shared his vision with his mentor, Caleb, who immediately knew he was describing a Mbuti (or Pygmy) tribe in the Congo. "Caleb told me he was leading a group there in a month and he encouraged me to go with him." [Wren visited](#), and saw that the need was serious, so he went and lived there a year. He slept in a twig-and-leaf hut, ate their food, and suffered from the same diseases. One bout with malaria nearly killed him. He said "But no matter how tough things got, I felt more at home than I ever had in the gym."

Wren was soon adopted as part of the tribe and given a new name, "The Big Pygmy, The Man Who Loves Us." Wren returned to the MMA cage to raise money for the organization he started: *Fight for the Forgotten*. He said, "The drive to fight is still there, but I'm no longer fighting my inner demons. I'm fighting to fulfill God's call on my life."

This story is exactly why some people are afraid to yield their lives to Christ; because they are afraid God will make them to live with pygmies in Africa! But that is exactly the point! When we have saving faith it's not about what I want, it's about what Christ wants for me. That doesn't mean that if you have

saving faith you have to become a missionary to Africa. It does mean that you are willing to follow where Jesus leads. And, incidentally, if Christ wants something for us, we will want it too. Look at the smile on Wren's face. Is that the picture of a miserable man? No way! The details of his story are different than yours or mine, but the main theme is the same: Jesus is in charge of my life. Is he saved because he went to Africa? No. He was saved by grace through faith, and his faith led him to die to self and fulfill what Jesus had for him, which is also giving him joy.

Another trait of saving grace is **Saving Faith becomes visible**. Paul tells us in **Galatians 2:20** *"The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me..."* After Paul came to faith in Jesus, his life was noticeably different. It was obvious. Paul didn't merely have a different opinion about who Jesus was, the whole trajectory of his life changed. His priorities changed. His travel itinerary changed. The way he spent money changed. The way he spent his time was different. The way he showed love changed. The people he spent time with changed. Those changes were produced by his faith. Those changes were *not* what saved him. He was saved by grace through faith. But the kind of faith that saves us always becomes visible.

If there is no visible evidence of faith, there may not be saving faith present. **James 2:14-16** *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?* James isn't saying that feeding the hungry saves us; it does say that the faith that saves us will feed the hungry. It will be visible. If there is no visible evidence of trust and obedience to Jesus, there may not be faith present. There may be belief present, but we are not saved through belief.

Just a few verses later, in **James 2:19** *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.* The devil believes God is real and that Jesus rose from the dead. But the devil doesn't have saving faith; the devil doesn't respond with trust and obedience to Jesus.

The Judaizers were concerned that if people were told they were saved by faith they would keep sinning and assume God would forgive. Paul, James and all the New Testament say that if we can keep sinning with no problem, then we haven't yet come to saving faith.

Faith is an active trust that results in obedience. James is pointing out that if our faith does not prompt us to act in kingdom ways, we are fooling ourselves to think it is saving faith. It is not the "works" that save, the works are rather an indicator of the genuineness of our faith.

If we can live ignoring God's standards of sexual behavior, it's a sign of a serious breakdown of faith. We need to repent; to turn away and ask God's cleansing and help. If we can ignore conflict with others and harbor bitterness, we need to repent or the spiritual life in us will become strangled. If we ignore those in need and those we could help, James says faith is more dead than alive, and we need to repent. We are then only fooling ourselves that we have come to faith as we have not.

We don't become instantly perfect when we have saving faith, but we see the road we are on and realize when we've slipped off. We recognize that God loves us all the time, and that we can't earn our salvation.

Galatians 2 ²⁰ *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Today, I want to invite you to pray a prayer that reflects that faith. It is the same prayer Justin Wren prayed, which is much like the prayer John Wesley and countless others through history have prayed: **"God, I'm yours. Is there anything you want me to do? I want to do your will, not mine."** This is the prayer of a disciple. This is a step 3 prayer. We'll take a moment to reflect on what it means for us, and then I'll invite all who are ready to pray it to the Lord.