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Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This

by David Servant

TEN

The True Mark

How can you tell if your popcorn is salted? If it tastes salty, you know there's salt on it.

How can you tell if a person believes in Jesus? If he displays unselfish love, he's a true believer in Jesus. His spiritual nature has been transformed from selfishness to *unselfishness*.

If a person says he is a Christian but lives entirely for his own selfish ends, he is deceived.

The many selfish acts that have been committed down through the centuries by those who professed Christ serve as irrefutable evidence that those people were *not*, in fact, Christians at all.

The crusaders who waged their "holy wars" and the so-called "servants of Christ" who were lavish in extravagant self-indulgence at the expense of the impoverished laity were not born again by God's Spirit. The so-called "Christians" who supported Hitler's "final solution" to exterminate the Jews could not possibly have been true believers in Christ. They may have been "converted" (in their heads), but they'd never been transformed in their hearts and spirits.

We need not travel back in history to find those who profess Christ but deny Him by their actions. The church is full of people *today* who think they are Christians yet who are not. Many who think they are born again are not born again by Christ's Spirit at all.

The Bible gives us a clear standard of measure whereby each of us as individuals can determine if we truly do believe in Jesus. That standard of measure is the love we show to others. That is what this chapter is all about.

If the whole reason we were heading for an eternal hell was because we led lives characterized by selfish ambition, then it would stand to reason that once we enter into a relationship with God, we *no longer* lead lives characterized by selfish ambition. That is true repentance.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus disqualified certain individuals from being saved because they demonstrated an unwillingness to repent of their selfish life-styles.

Yet many churches have preached a watered-down message of salvation, offering it to anyone who will just “accept Jesus” (as if poor Jesus needs our acceptance). These churches, however, fail to inform their congregations of the God-given requirement to turn from selfishness. This watered-down gospel is completely contrary to the gospel of the Bible, as we saw in chapter seven. There is no salvation without repentance; and if a person has truly repented, he has turned from selfishness.

The Bible teaches that each of us will be judged by our actions before God. The reason is because it is our actions that plainly reveal what is in our hearts. Our deeds do not merit us our salvation, but our deeds *do* prove whether or not we have repented and believed in Jesus. This will become abundantly clear to you as we study what the Bible has to say on the subject.

The Selfish Young Man Jesus Disqualified

Recorded in three out of the four Gospels is the very significant story of a wealthy young man who came to Jesus seeking eternal life. Let’s read his story:

And as He [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and began asking Him, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:17-18).

Already Jesus has made a very significant statement to this young man who desired eternal life. He told him that all people are sinners because no one is good except God alone. That is the first thing a person needs to know before he can be saved—he must admit he is a sinner.

Second, Jesus reaffirmed His own deity by implication: He didn’t deny that He was, in fact, good, as the young man had said, and then went on to state that only God *is* good. Once again, He was claiming to be God, which is something else a person must believe if he is to be saved.

Let’s continue the story as Jesus went on to say:

“You know the commandments, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.”

And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property.

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!....It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:19-23, 25).

As we would have expected, Jesus told this young man who was seeking eternal life that he needed to repent and follow Him. After telling him that all people are sinners and affirming His own deity by implication, Jesus reminded him of the Ten Commandments. In fact, Jesus recited the six commandments that govern our relationship with others. The New Testament teaches that God gave the commandments to help us realize how sinful we really are, so we might see our need for a Savior:

Therefore the Law [the Ten Commandments] has become *our tutor to lead us to Christ*, that we may be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24; emphasis added).

Jesus quoted the commandments so the rich young man would realize how far he'd fallen short of keeping them. Then he would see his need for a Savior.

Self-righteously, however, the young man claimed to have kept from his youth the commandments Jesus listed. That just wasn't true, and Jesus was about to prove it to him.

The final commandment Jesus recited to the rich young man was the one that sums up all the commandments governing our relationships with others: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Mark's Gospel doesn't record Jesus actually reciting this commandment to the man, but Matthew's Gospel does; see Matthew 19:16-24.)

This young man was claiming that all of his life he had practiced loving his neighbor as himself. But he really hadn't. We can be sure of this, because when Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, the young man wouldn't do it. He *refused* to love his neighbor as himself. He would not repent of his selfishness.

Although the rich young man was well aware of the fact that some of his "neighbors" were very poor and needed help, he was unwilling to liquidate any of his assets to assist them. His motivation for living was pure selfish ambition-not service to others. He wouldn't repent, and thus, couldn't be saved.

"But I thought that we are saved by faith, and not by works!" you exclaim. Certainly, and it's obvious that this young man didn't have faith. He didn't believe Jesus was the Son of God before whom he would one day stand to give an account of his life. Had he believed, he would have obeyed. Note also that he addressed Jesus as simply a "good teacher," not as *Lord* or *Master*.

When Gold is God

Prior to His conversation with the rich young man, Jesus had already made the profound statement,

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money]" (Matthew 6:24).

In reality, people don't actually serve money. They selfishly serve themselves, and this fact is revealed by what they do with their money. Rather than share it with those who are less fortunate, they hoard it up or spend it on themselves for things they really don't need. But if a person wants to be saved, he *must* repent of the selfish use of his money, a sin classified in the Bible as greed or covetousness. The apostle Paul wrote that covetous people are really idolaters, and they will not be saved:

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or *covetous man*, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (Ephesians 5:5; emphasis added).

As John the Baptist boldly proclaimed when people inquired as to what they should do to authenticate their repentance: “Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise” (Luke 3:11).

This is why, as Jesus said, it is so hard for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Obviously, it wouldn't be hard if they could just go on selfishly spending their God-given resources on themselves! But, like everyone else, the wealthy must decide if they are going to continue their selfish life-style or repent. The rich person's repentance, however, requires paying a higher price (at least in his own mind). Being saved means he can no longer live in extravagant self-indulgence while, with his full knowledge, multitudes starve.

If God has blessed you with more money than you really need, and if you plan to go to heaven, you will share your blessings with the less fortunate. Again, it's not your good works that will save you, but your works will prove that you have really believed in Jesus. If you continue to selfishly hoard your riches, you are proving to all that you really don't believe in Jesus. Jesus plainly told the rich young ruler that *first* he had to repent of selfishness, and *then* the next step was to follow Him (Jesus).

Does this mean that anyone who wants to be saved must sell *all* his possessions and give the money to the poor? No. Repentance simply requires a turning from selfishness. To the degree that you've been selfish, to that same degree, you must repent.

If you've been selfish with your money, then you must stop being selfish with it, regardless of how much or how little you possess. Obviously, those who are extremely wealthy and who spend all their money on themselves are going to have to change their life-style. True repentance from selfishness may require them to sell some of their possessions and give the money to those who are less fortunate. Every person will have to answer to God for himself and satisfy his own conscience.

I'm well aware that what I'm saying isn't popular in our materialistic society and that it flies in the face of what some preachers are saying today. Some even try to convince us that having hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank and owning extravagant items is a sign of spirituality. That is absurd. Hoarding tons of money is not a sign of spirituality-it's a sign of selfishness.

What if the rich young man had said, “Jesus, I accept You as my Lord and Savior, but I'm going to continue hoarding up more and more money and living for my own selfish desires even though there are so many poor people I could potentially help”? Would that man have been saved? Of course not, as anyone knows who has honestly read the story we just read.

True believers in Jesus are characterized by their unselfish love. And that unselfish love is demonstrated, among other ways, by how they use their money.

Setting the Standard

In the apostle John's first letter, he discusses how it is possible to determine if you are truly a child of God. The determining standard is love, and that love is manifested by actions:

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are *obvious*: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, *nor the one who does not love his brother....*

We know that we have passed out of death into life [have been born again], *because we love the brethren*. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. *But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?* Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth... (1 John 3:10, 14-18; emphasis added).

That makes it quite plain that the mark of the true Christian is unselfish love, particularly love for his fellow Christians. And that love will be demonstrated not just by words but by actions. That truth is the dominant theme of John's entire first letter.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote a stern letter to the Christians of his day. He told them that they were saved by faith—a faith, however, that was authenticated by acts of unselfish love:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14).

The obvious answer to James' rhetorical question is a resounding, "NO!" Faith, void of works, cannot save anyone. Let's continue reading as James illustrates exactly what kind of works he means:

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (James 2:15-17).

Once again it is crystal clear that true faith results in deeds of unselfish love.

In a passage in the book of Romans, which I have quoted earlier in this book, the apostle Paul also affirms this same truth:

But because of your stubbornness and *unrepentant* heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance *in doing good* seek for glory and honor and immortality, *eternal life*; but to those who are *selfishly ambitious* and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, *wrath and indignation*. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... (Romans 2:5-9a; emphasis added).

These verses have caused embarrassment to some who have over-emphasized the "faith" requirement of the gospel at the neglect of the "repent" requirement. Paul, however, is not saying that we are saved by our works, as is obvious from reading the rest

of the book of Romans. He is only reaffirming the truth that true believers have a life-style characterized by “doing good,” and those whose lives are characterized by selfish ambition are *obviously not* true believers.

Finally, Jesus Himself taught this same truth. We’ve already witnessed how He required the rich young man to repent of selfishness if he wanted eternal life. In His famous “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus taught His followers to love even their enemies. He said that by so doing, they would prove themselves to be sons of God:

“And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you *in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

“For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:40-47; emphasis added).

Sons of God are supposed to act like God-loving unselfishly. In fact, Jesus said that the mark of His true disciples would be their love for one another:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Jesus Incognito

The Bible affirms that all of us will be judged according to our deeds—not because our deeds earn us salvation but because our deeds prove whether or not we have truly repented and believed in Jesus. Listen to how Jesus described a certain future judgment before the throne of God:

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’

“Then they themselves also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’

“Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Those at this judgment will obviously be judged by their deeds. The ones who demonstrated unselfish love for their brethren will be vindicated as true believers in Jesus. Those who did not demonstrate unselfish love, but rather selfish ambition, will prove to be unbelievers.

Every professing Christian should imagine himself at this future judgment and determine if he will be classed with the sheep or goats, based on the six works Jesus listed and other similar works. If you find yourself presently classed with the goats, you need to be born again.

True Love Demonstrated

In light of all the scriptures I’ve quoted in this chapter, and in light of the fact that the Bible plainly says that God deposits His own nature of love within our spirits when we are born again, the truth is obvious: True believers in Jesus will be characterized by unselfish love. And that unselfish love will manifest itself through unselfish deeds and words.

The early church of the apostles obviously understood this truth and practiced it:

And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need....

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them....

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32,34-35).

I don't think these first Christians were selling their *primary* homes and giving away the proceeds, or else they would have had nowhere to live themselves. I have to think that those who owned a second home, land or unnecessary items they weren't using, sold those things in order to assist the poor. Regardless, the new birth affected how every one of them viewed their possessions. They were no longer private owners, but considered themselves stewards of God's possessions, which were to be shared freely with the other members of His family.

This should be the natural attitude adopted by those who have truly repented of selfishness and believed in Jesus Christ-and not just a phenomenon of the "overly-zealous" early Christians. Too many churches, however, are like the church at Ephesus to which Jesus sent the following message:

"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first..." (Revelation 2:4-5a).

Bible interpreters have argued concerning what exactly was the "first love" that the Ephesians left. Was it daily Bible reading? Was it devotion to prayer? Was it attending church?

My opinion is that Jesus was referring to none of those things. I think He meant exactly what He said, that they had left their first love-that is, that they weren't demonstrating the love toward others they'd demonstrated at first. And that is why Jesus told them to repent and do the deeds they'd done originally.

Why I Wrote This Chapter

My reason for writing this chapter is three-fold.

First, I realize that some people have avoided the message of the gospel because they have experienced the hatred of some *so-called* Christians. I wanted those unfortunate people to understand that the so-called Christians who hated them were not, in fact, true Christians at all. My hope is that they will now consider the words of Jesus, repent of their own sins, and believe in Him.

Second, I wanted every Christian reader to look within himself and perform a personal spiritual diagnosis to determine whether his profession of faith is genuine. Hopefully, some who have been motivated solely by selfish ambition, and yet thought they were born again, now realize their self-deception. I pray they have now truly repented and believed in Jesus.

May I also add that all Christians are tempted daily to act selfishly, and none of us has reached perfection in unselfish love. That is what we are striving for. The Bible makes it plain that love is a fruit that should be growing continually in the life of every believer (see Galatians 5:22-23, 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, 1 John 2:5, 4:12, 17-18).

Just because we yield to the temptation to commit some small selfish act does not mean we are not really saved. When a true Christian does commit an act of selfishness, he will feel guilty in his spirit and should immediately ask for God's forgiveness. God, of

course, will grant it to him (see 1 John 1:9). Still, the Bible teaches that our hearts can be assured that we truly are saved as we love unselfishly (see 1 John 3:16-21, 4:16-18).

And *third*, I wrote this chapter so that Christians might stop and question how non-Christians view them. Are we presenting a true representation of Christ to the world? Are we communicating a message to non-Christians that we love them as God loves them?

Why is it that, so often, unbelievers think that born-again people are only a bunch of self-righteous (and often hypocritical) moralists who are zealous for conservative political causes? Why don't they speak of us as the ones who are always serving others, who are full of mercy when wronged, who pray for those who hate them, who generously share their belongings, and who love all people, regardless of their social status, their race, their religion or their conduct?

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God...” (Ephesians 5:1-2).