



How do you think someone enters into a *right* relationship with God?

How would you describe/define Christianity to a friend?

What do you think it means to have "faith"?

What keeps you from being or becoming a Christian?

⊠ Coming to our final chapter of this study, we want to look at what is required of us. Up to this point we have seen that Jesus has given us a diagnosis of sin and a prescription of healing found in his life, death, and resurrection. Now all of this is great, but it all happened a couple thousand years ago. What does this mean for us today? How are we expected to respond to the person and work of Jesus?

To understand what is required of us in response to what He has said and done, we must introduce and further explain another buzz word in the religious world: faith. Mystery, confusion, hurt, abuse, joy and many other feelings and experiences may be attached to that one simple word. Processing where those feelings come from, it would be easy to see how many of them are attached to individuals or institutions who have used that word for good or evil. But what we want to do is hear the word from Jesus himself to see how He understands and communicates its meaning and implication on our life. For us to encounter Jesus and know life we need to understand how he defines faith and what hinders us from embracing it.

So what is it? If you went around and asked a hundred different people, there is a good chance you would get about a hundred different answers. Faith can be ambiguous and mysterious, but we must understand it is dealing with the whole of your life, your mind, body, and soul. To get a better picture of this, let's take a brief look into another encounter with Jesus alongside of a literary example from Middle Earth (yes, you read that correctly!). First, let's start with Jesus. In Mark's account of the life of Jesus, he recounts the interaction between Jesus and a man he calls the Rich Young Man. To summarize this encounter, the Rich Young Man asks Jesus what someone must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, knowing the man's heart, tells him to keep the commandments. The Rich Young Man responds that he has done so. Check. Completed. The next words out of Jesus' mouth give us a clearer picture into faith. "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'" (Mark 10:21 ESV). Here, Jesus reveals what's at the center of this man's life. He pries into the very essence of this man's life. All he hoped in, trusted in, worked for, treasured and valued. This Rich Young Man's life was tied to his riches. Faith is not about doing the right things, all though it is very wise to do so. Faith is the laying down of one's life. Faith is submitting to Jesus' reign in the most treasured part of who you are. Sadly, the Rich Young Man left Jesus disheartened, because for him eternal life was not worth all his riches. He loved his riches more than he loved life forever with God. Faith is the laying down of our life, surrendering our efforts of righteousness and our self-salvation projects to rest in the finished work of Christ. Faith is relinquishing our lives and embracing his grace.

But aren't we just like the Rich Young Man? Faith is so frequently rejected, and at the call of Jesus to give up our treasures, whatever they may be, we leave disheartened. Why? What makes the call to surrender and follow Jesus such a costly thing to obey and trust? Let's look at J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to get a deeper understanding. In the opening book of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, we see Frodo inheriting the One Ring To Rule Them All. As Gandalf warns him of the coming danger, he is forced to leave the Shire. Now, this is not an undesirable thing for Frodo. Remember, Biblo had shown him great mercy in adopting him and making him his heir, both to his apparent riches, and even more so to his life experiences. See, Frodo took after Biblo's love for adventure. Frodo deeply loved Biblo, but when it came time to take on the risky journey, knowing that death and destruction were eminent if he stayed, he hesitated...for weeks! He suddenly became very desirous of the comfort and security of the Shire. To Frodo, the Shire was now becoming a place of safety for him. It was an illusion.

This is why we hesitate in placing our faith in Jesus. We may know the danger of our sinful lives, we may be well acquainted with the person and work of Christ, even claim to love him. But, if we are honest, we are scared of the risk. We want the comforts and securities of our control. We begin to love and desire the comfortable feeling of what we know. We want the Shire, even though we know its end is death. But we must come to realize that staying, remaining in the hobbit-hole of our lives, is a false sense of security. He has done all the work. He has gone before you in every way. He calls you to follow him, to put your life and salvation in his hands, out of love, not judgment. Jesus looks at you, and in love, says, "You lack one thing...come, follow me." Will you?

Snapshots from the Book of John

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18 ESV)

What do you think is the significance of Mary being the first to find the tomb empty and interact with the risen Christ? Why?

Why do you think Mary stayed behind near the tomb when the others went back to their homes?

Why do you think Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener?

Why did she recognize Him once He called her by name? What does this mean?

Dr. Tim Keller's Commentary on the Passages Above

Here is perhaps the main point of the New Testament in narrative form.

At the outset, you can see the remarkable tenderness of this interaction. There are several places in the Old Testament where God confronts people who are seriously mistaken or wayward, doing so not with intimidating declarations but with gentle, probing questions. In the Garden of Eden, God asks disobedient Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" and "How did you come to feel shame?" To the rebellious prophet Jonah God asks, "Are you right to be angry?" Counselors know that is not enough to simply tell people how to live. Asking questions helps the person to recognize their errors, to discover and embrace truth from their hearts. The questions of Jesus are similar. "Why are you crying?" is really a gentle rebuke to Mary, a call to wake up. "Who is it you are looking for?" is a more penetrating invitation to, as commentator D.A. Carson writes on this verse, "widen her horizons and to recognize that, grand as her devotion to him was, her estimate of him was still far too small."

Notice, however, that Mary misinterprets Jesus' questions. She thinks perhaps he is the caretaker of the place and that he might know where Jesus' body has been moved. So Jesus makes another effort to break through to her heart, and does so with a simple word. Earlier in this Gospel, Jesus said that he was the Good Shepherd, that he "calls his own sheep by name" and "his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3-4). And that is what he does here, simply saying, "Mary." Real faith is always personal. If you only believe that Jesus died to forgive people in general for their sins—but you don't believe that Jesus did for you—you aren't taking hold of Jesus by faith. You haven't heard him call you by name.

But we learn even more here about the relationship of grace and faith. At the moment Mary realizes Jesus is alive, he sends her with the message "Go to my brothers and tell them..."—and in a sense she becomes the first Christian. Why? Well, what's a Christian? A Christian believes that Jesus died and was raised from the dead. A Christian has had an encounter with that risen Christ. And at this moment Mary is the only person in the world of whom those things are true.

Now, is this an accident? I don't believe so. Jesus could have easily arranged to make anyone the first messenger. He chose her. And that means Jesus Christ specifically chose a woman, not a man; chose a reformed mental patient, not a pillar of the community; chose one of the support team, not one of the leaders, to be the first Christian. How much clearer can he be? He is saying, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. My salvation is not based on pedigree, it's not based on moral attainments, raw talent, level of effort, or track record. I have come not to call those who are strong, but to call those who are weak. And I am not mainly your teacher but your savior. I'm here to save you not by your work, but by my work." And the minute you understand that, the minute you see yourself in Mary Magdalene's place, something will change forever in you. You'll be following the first Christian.

You see, the text is not just telling us that grace is the cause of our faith, but it is the content, too. If you believe that Jesus was a great teacher and you believe he can help you answer your prayers if you live according to his ethical prescriptions, you are not yet a Christian. That's general belief but not saving faith. Real Christian faith believes that Jesus saves us through his death and resurrection so we can be accepted by sheer grace. That is the gospel—the good news that we are saved by the work of Christ through grace...

So faith is a gift of God. Built on thinking and evidence, activated by God's miraculous intervention, based on the radical discovery that Jesus has accomplished everything we need and we can be adopted and accepted into God's family, and all of this by sheer grace. Is that it? Do we simply sit down, content and transformed, with the knowledge of this love? No—we are to spend the rest of our lives tasting, experiencing, and being shaped by that gracious love...Real faith connects you to Christ, not just for salvation from the penalty of your sins, but for an ongoing love relationship with him.