

# 718 Does Faith Really Matter?

## Phil Sanders

### God's Answers to Life's Questions

We often hear people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you love Jesus." But doesn't what we believe matter in how we live and what we teach our children? Does faith matter? When I become sick, I go to a certain doctor because I have faith in him and in his ability to make me well. What is the goal of placing my faith in the doctor?—to get well. But is that faith enough?—no. I must also do all the things which the doctor asks me to do, take all the medicine, whether it is sweet or bitter. Just faith, abstract faith, will not reach its goal without my doing the things which the man in whom I place my faith asks me to do. As a result of that obedience I can reach the goal of my faith. Christianity is not just a doctrine to believe; it is a way of life.

Faith is essential to Christianity. Jesus said in John 3:16-18, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." At another time Jesus said, "but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). In Hebrews 11:6, the Hebrew writer explained, "without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Faith, however, is not merely what we claim to believe; but it is what we live. We live our faith; and our actions speak louder than our claims.

James said in James 2:14-19, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" James realized there were Christians who talked their faith but didn't practice it. They were unbelievers not in theory but in practice. James had already said to them in 1:22, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." It is a deception to ourselves to say we are believers but to neglect living what we believe.

It has been said, "You only really believe, what you act upon." Sometimes people refuse to believe God in a practical way. They force him out of their thinking, so that they can behave the way they want to. David said in Psalm 10:3-4, "For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God." The wicked person doesn't want to believe in God. He has involved himself in things with which God would interfere. It is not in his mind that he rejects the idea of God, it is in his behavior. Paul in Colossians 1:21 spoke of Christians who earlier in their lives were pagans; he described them at that time as "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." Sometimes people who know there is a God have just as much hostility in their minds. They live as if God does not exist. They ignore God. God is irrelevant to their lives. They do

not communicate with God or seek the direction of God. They do not make Jesus Christ to be Lord of their lives or seek to live like him. They are "practical atheists."

Some folks reject God openly in theory, because they don't want God to interfere with their lives. Aldous Huxley, an atheist who destroyed the faith of many in his book, *Ends and Means*, explained why he chose not to believe. "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics, he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do, or why his friends should not seize political power and govern in the way that they find most advantageous to themselves...For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political." In our world today, selfish power often causes people to deny the truth of Jesus Christ either openly in theory or, as in most cases, secretly in practice. They claim Christianity but live like pagans.

Paul helps us to understand there is a difference in life and thinking between the person who does not know God and the person who lives for Christ. He said in Ephesians 4:17-24, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Belief in Jesus Christ must lead to a change in thinking and in life.

Christian faith is faith in Christ Jesus as Lord. Faith means that Jesus has power and authority in my life. The value of our faith is not in the one who believes but in the One who is believed. Jesus is Lord, and I am not. The worth of our faith is not that we trusted but that the Lord is worthy of our obedience and will keep His promises. Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:12, "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day." Many people reject God, not so much because of the mind but because of the will. It is not so much that they cannot believe as it is they won't believe. They will not allow Jesus to be their Lord and master. There is a huge gap in American Christianity between what people profess to believe, and the way they actually live their lives. The practical atheist does not believe that God has spoken with authority, especially if God has said things that are dogmatic or out of step with contemporary culture. The god of the practical atheist has to keep step with the times. The practical atheist feels free to tell God what it will and will not believe, what it will and will not do, and how it will and will not worship. The God of heaven has no say in their

lives. He has been dismissed. But, my friend, you cannot dismiss God forever.

When people get proud and rebel against God's teaching, they often believe they can do it with no consequences. I think of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:15-16: "In Jerusalem he made engines of war invented by skillful men to be on the towers and on the corners for the purpose of shooting arrows and great stones. Hence his fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped until he was strong. But when he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the LORD his God, for he entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense." To presume we can live our lives outside the authority of God, that we can obey when we wish and act on our own when we wish, is folly. Such thinking will surely lead to our destruction. Uzziah was headstrong that day, and God punished him with leprosy for the rest of his life. No one can thumb his nose at God for long and expect to remain in the favor and grace of God.

The practical atheist professes to believe in God, his worldview, God's values, and God's morals but draws his behavior from popular culture rather than the revealed Word of God. While professing to believe in the sacred, the practical atheist is so thoroughly schooled by popular life that he has little need for God. Practical atheism is in reality a form of hypocrisy. A hypocrite is a person who "pretends to be what he does not intend to be." Jesus illustrates his dissatisfaction with the religious hypocrites of his day in Matthew 23:27-28: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." The practical atheist fools himself if he thinks that God does not see and know how he is living.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Now, I hold that secret sin, if any thing, is the worst of sins; because secret sin implies that the man who commits it has Atheism in his heart. You will ask how that can be. I reply, he may be a professing Christian, but I shall tell him to his face that he is a practical Atheist, if he labors to keep up a respectable profession before man, and then secretly transgresses. Why is not he an Atheist, who will say there is a God, yet at the same time thinks more of man than he does of God? Is it not the very essence of Atheism--is it not a denial of the divinity of the Most High when men lightly esteem him and think more of the eye of a creature than of the observation of their Creator? There are some who would not, for the life of them, say a wicked word in the presence of their minister, but they can do it, knowing God is looking at them. They are Atheists. There are some who would not trick in trade for all the world if they thought they should be discovered, but they can do it while God is with them; that is, they think more of the eye of man than of the eye of God; and they think it worse to be condemned by man than to

condemned by God. Call it by what name you will, the proper name of that is practical Atheism."

You see it matters not only what we believe but how we believe it and how we practice it. There have been times in the history of God's people that they neglected to study the word of God. Amos prophesied in Amos 8:11: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it." One of the heartaches of our time is that there are plenty of Bibles in print but so little Bible demonstrated in the lives of Christians. Today, we do not have a famine of Christian teaching in print, but a famine of Christian example and morality. We must do more than talk and teach our faith; we must demonstrate it in our lives. My friend, have you taken up your cross? Are you living for the Lord? Are you serving Him daily and helping others to find the Lord?

How many people would not ever say in their hearts, 'There is no God', but would deny him practically by living their lives as if he did not exist? They might say, "I am a Christian" but never study their Bible, pray, or go to church. And even among those who go to church, many yet deny this God is the Lord of all the earth. They let him into part of their lives but shut him out of other parts. Some look for his guidance in some matters but not in others. If Jesus is Lord at all, he must be Lord of every aspect of our lives. Many people want Jesus to save them from all their sins, but they do not think about having Jesus as Lord of every hour of every day. We want God to hear our every prayer and meet our every need; but we don't want God to inconvenience us with commands we don't like or expect us to sacrifice ourselves for his service. Jesus bore a cross for our sins and asks us to bear a cross for him. That means we must die to ourselves and live with faith in Christ, His ways, His morals, and His teaching. The way that we begin that process is by a study of God's word. We need to know the truth of the gospel. The gospel teaches us that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and arose from the dead on the third day. We take up our cross by obeying the gospel. This obedience arises out of our faith and love for Christ. When we love and believe in Him and his teaching, we will repent of our sins, we'll confess Christ to all, and we'll be baptized into Christ. Baptism, according to the Scriptures, is an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said in Mark 16:16, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." If we love the Lord, we're not going to complain or debate with the Lord over this command or any other. If we love the Lord, we're going to be excited about obeying the Lord and serving Him everyday. My friend, I hope you are eager to obey the gospel and to serve Him always. I hope you'll take seriously your faith in God and live what you believe. Today, my friend, is the best day for you to begin this new life.

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