

How Can I Know If I Love God?

By Rev. Tom Aicken

Jesus set two commandments above all others when He said (1) “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and (2) “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Indeed, this is the focus, emphasis and summary teaching we find throughout the inspired, inerrant and infallible writings of “all the Law and the Prophets” (v. 40). These commandments set a high standard of morality, one that a Spirit-led child of God struggles to maintain with varying degrees of success, and one to which the unbeliever left to his own resources will never attain. The unbeliever cannot love like that because he is dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-3), because he harbours enmity toward both God and his neighbour (vv. 14-18), and because his carnal mind is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be (Rom. 8:5-8).

This teaching of loving God and one’s neighbour is straightforward enough, yet it is a stumbling block for a great many people, including believers who lack assurance of their salvation and unbelievers who blindly assume that they have such assurance. The timid Christian, on the one hand, the believer who lacks assurance of his having a saving interest in Christ, may think that he does not love God or his neighbour enough as a result of his sins and failure to overcome them. Little does he realize that his hatred for sin and ongoing struggle to conquer every trace of it in his life, if indeed he does, is itself the evidence of his love for the Lord and of God working in him to will and to do of His good pleasure.

The self-assured unbeliever, on the other hand, may think that he is right with God, and even that he loves Him, but he presumes that for all the wrong reasons. He may think that he loves God, for instance, simply because he believes there really is a God and does not speak of Him disrespectfully, or because he regularly repeats the Lord’s Prayer and even goes to church. In countless cases he does not acknowledge his enmity toward God because he is not aware of it and would not recognize it even if he saw it. He thinks his sins are not so bad because they are little in his eyes, minor infractions as he sees them, and not nearly as many or as shameful as those of so many other people all around him. From all this it is clear that we must examine specific marks of a Christian, what clearly sets him apart from an unbeliever, and not allow sheer presumption to cloud our understanding.

Here are four easily identifiable marks of a true Christian:

1. A Christian, because he does love God, will seek to live a God-honouring life.

(a) Like Abraham, he believes God (Gen. 15:6), including His promise that He is working all things together for good to those who love Him and are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). He seeks to take every word of the Lord seriously and will not add to it or subtract from it.

(b) He acknowledges God in his whole way of life, rejoices that it is in Him he lives and moves and has his being, praises Him for who He is, for His unchanging character and for His mercies which are new every morning.

(c) He loves righteousness. He seeks to obey God, not as a means of gaining His favour but as a means of expressing gratitude for His favour; he wants to do what is pleasing to the Lord, to be holy as the Lord Himself is holy.

(d) He hates sin, especially his own. He does not continue in sin but repents of it. He seeks the forgiveness of God and pleads for His sanctifying grace in order for him to present his body a living sacrifice to Him.

(e) He not only believes God's word but seeks to trust Him for all that is yet hidden to him also, to grow in faith from strength to strength, and he prays for that grace and courage to commit everything to Him, his faithful Creator, who knows what is best for him and judges righteously.

2. A Christian, because he does love God, will seek to live a Christ-centred life.

No one can come to God the Father except through Jesus, His only begotten Son (John 14:6). He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him (John 5:23). While the Lord our God does not give His glory to another (Isaiah 42:8), it is to the Father's glory that we confess His Son to be Lord (Phil. 2:11), for the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons in one God (John 10:30; 14:8-11; Matt. 28:19).

Being fully aware of these things, also knowing that he has been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20) and that he has a living hope through His resurrection from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3), the believer finds the Lord Jesus Christ to be

precious (1 Pet. 2:7) and continues to surrender himself to His sovereign authority over every aspect of his life. Because he is complete in Christ (Col. 2:10), he will seek in turn to be wholly devoted to Him, to identify himself as His bondservant (Jas. 1:1) and to confess, “for to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). Is the Lord Jesus precious to you? Is He everything to you? This question should not be difficult to answer. I have known believers who were by their own confession small in faith and weak in understanding of doctrine, yet could freely confess with joy their love for Christ and desire in all things to make Him preeminent. The testimony of their own hearts was undeniable even to them. In contrast, the unbeliever, dead in sin and imprisoned by his own relentless enmity, does not and cannot experience any such love and devotion to the Lord.

3. A Christian, because he does love God, will seek to live a Spirit-filled life.

(a) He is someone who has the Holy Spirit as the downpayment and guarantee of his eternal inheritance (Eph. 1:13,14). As such, the Spirit bears witness with his spirit that he is a child and heir of God (Rom. 8:16,17).

(b) As one who is led of the Spirit, he is drawn to the sacred writings of the Old and New Testament, to meditate upon them, to store them up in his heart and to live them out in his life. As a result, he makes use of every means of grace, both public and private, in order to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ.

(c) Knowing something of how weak he is, and how prone to sin, he seeks to go on being filled with the Spirit who helps him in all his weaknesses, producing in him the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control), that he might not waver but continue to walk in the paths of righteousness.

4. A Christian, because he does love God, will seek to love his neighbour.

(a) He loves his neighbour, not as something he sees to be in addition to his love for God, or in place of it, but as an outgrowth of that love, as a ready and indispensable response to it (1 John 4:20,21).

(b) His love for his neighbour is not restricted to those who love him, or even to his brothers and sisters in Christ, but extends as well to his enemies.

He is able to love even his enemies because that love, as he has come to understand, is not first of all a feeling – though love may demonstrate a very powerful feeling – but is above all else a positive attitude and an unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of all those to whom it is extended (Luke 6:27-36).

Having examined your own life in the light of these four marks, can you now determine with any conviction that you are one who truly loves God? If so, then however inadequate you may deem your love to Him may be, and however ashamed you might feel as a result of making so little progress in grace, you have a saving interest in Christ, believer, and a glorious inheritance which can never be lost (Rom. 8:16,17). There are two lessons you should draw from this. The first is to be thankful (vv. 21-25). You are not hanging onto God, dear Christian, as if you ever could, but He is hanging onto you and will never let you go (1 Pet. 1:5).

The second lesson is to keep pressing ahead toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12-16). You are complete in Christ, as we have seen, yet, as a newborn child is complete but still needs to grow, so, too, do you need to grow, to mature and seek to be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ.

If, though, you can now see that you are not a Christian, contrary to everything you ever imagined to this point in your life, you are still a stranger to this saving grace, unbeliever, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). There are also two lessons here for you. The first is not to plunge yourself into despair but to commit your life and all that you have to the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the only Saviour, remember (Acts 4:12); He saves to the uttermost those who come unto the Father through Him (Heb. 7:25), and He saves all you who call upon Him (Rom. 10:11-13).

The second lesson is just as important: Do not delay, or for any reason put off, committing your life to Christ (Is. 55:6; 2 Cor. 6:2). Your present life is the only opportunity you will ever have to be made right with God (Heb. 9:27); you simply do not know when it might suddenly end and this glorious opportunity, this gracious invitation of God in Christ, will be permanently forfeited. Unbeliever, I plead with you by the mercies of God to turn from sin and every worldly way, present your body a living sacrifice to God today (Rom. 12:1,2)!

