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By R. C. Sproul

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CAN I BE SURE  
*I'm* SAVED?

R. C. SPROUL

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR ASSURANCE

There is a passage in the New Testament that I believe is one of the most terrifying in the Bible. It comes from the lips of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

We tend to think of the Sermon on the Mount as a positive proclamation by our Lord. After all, it is in the Sermon on the Mount that He gives the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . . Blessed are the meek . . . ,” and so on (Matt. 5:3–12). Because of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has

a reputation as a preacher who accents the positive rather than the negative.

But we often overlook the climax of that sermon, where Jesus says:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matt. 7:21–23)

Here Jesus gives us a preview of the last judgment. He says that people will come to Him, addressing Him by the title “Lord.” They will say to Jesus: “Lord, we did many marvelous things in Your name. We served You; we preached in Your name; we cast out demons; we did all of these things.” Jesus says, “I will turn to these people and say, ‘Please leave.’” Not only will He say, “I don’t know you,” but, “I never knew you, you workers of lawlessness.”

What is particularly poignant about this terrifying

warning is that He begins by saying, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then He repeats that by saying, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord.’”

“Lord, Lord”

There are only about fifteen occurrences in all of Scripture where someone is addressed by the repetition of his or her name. Let me mention a few:

- Abraham on Mount Moriah was ready to plunge the knife into the chest of his son Isaac, and God intervened at the last second, saying to him through the angel of the Lord: “Abraham, Abraham! . . . Do not lay your hand on the boy” (Gen. 22:11–12).

- Jacob was afraid to go down into Egypt, and God came to reassure him, saying, “Jacob, Jacob” (Gen. 46:2).

- God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush at Mount Horeb, saying, “Moses, Moses!” (Ex. 3:4).

- God called to the boy Samuel in the middle of the night, saying, “Samuel! Samuel!” (1 Sam. 3:10).

- Jesus, when rebuking Martha in Bethany, said to her, “Martha, Martha” (Luke 10:41).

- Jesus lamented over the city of Jerusalem and cried out: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34).

- Peter said he would be strong in all circumstances, and Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31).

- Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4).

- Perhaps the most poignant example of this repetition in Scripture is found in Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

This rare grammatical structure has significance in the Hebrew language. When someone repeats the personal form of address, it suggests and communicates an intimate personal relationship with the person to whom he is speaking.

So Jesus says here in the Sermon on the Mount that on the last day, not only will people come to Him and say, “Lord, we belong to you, we’re yours,” but they will address Him in terms of personal intimacy. They will say, “Lord,

Lord,” as if they know Him in a deep, personal way. But despite this assumption of an intimate relationship, Jesus will say to them: “Please leave. I don’t know you workers of lawlessness.”

Jesus is saying that there are many people who profess to be Christians, who use the name of Christ, and who call Him by His exalted title “Lord” but actually are not in the kingdom of God at all. They do not belong to Him and will not be able to stand at the last judgment. The terrifying aspect of this is that these people are not on the fringes of the church. Rather, they are immersed in the life of the church, heavily involved in ministry, and perhaps have the reputation of being professing Christians. Yet Jesus doesn’t know them and will banish them from His presence.

I bring this up at the beginning of this booklet because when we make a profession of faith as Christians, we have to ask ourselves a question: How do we *know* that we won’t be among this group of people who will come at the last judgment, expecting entrance into the kingdom and addressing Jesus in intimate terms, only to be cast out? How do we know that our confidence that we are in a state of grace is not misplaced? How do we know we have not deceived ourselves? How can we be sure we are saved?

## A Controversial Doctrine

For centuries, the question of assurance has sparked controversy in the church. Many churches have gone so far as to question whether assurance is even attainable.

For example, at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church denied that it is possible for a person to have assurance of salvation except in rare circumstances. Rome went on to teach that the only people who can rise to assurance of their salvation in this life are exceptional saints to whom God gives a special revelation of their status before Him. However, the average member of the church cannot expect to have assurance of salvation.

Rome claims that most “assurances,” in the final analysis, are based on conjecture, opinion, and ideas that come from the hearts of people whom the Bible defines as deeply rooted in deceit. The Scriptures tell us that the heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9), so it is easy for us, Rome says, to deceive ourselves and to rest our confidence about the state of our souls on mere opinion. Consequently, assurance of salvation is not possible apart from some special act of revelation.

It is not only the Roman Catholic Church that denies

the doctrine of the assurance of salvation. Some Protestants believe that a person can have assurance of salvation for today but no assurance for tomorrow, because they accept the possibility that people who have faith at one time can fall away into faithlessness and lose their salvation. That's why, historically, the doctrine of the assurance of salvation has been tied closely to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. So whereas Rome says we cannot have assurance at all, these Protestants say we can have assurance for a limited time, but we cannot know what our ultimate state is going to be.

Then there is Reformed theology, my own theological persuasion, which teaches that we not only can know today that we are in a state of grace, but that we can have full assurance that we still will be in a state of grace at the times of our deaths.

### The Parable of the Sower

Jesus addresses the question of who is and is not genuinely saved in His parable of the sower:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about

him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matt. 13:1-9)

It is important to note the context of this famous parable. Just before it, someone says to Jesus, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You" (Matt. 12:47, NASB). But Jesus answers, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" (v. 48, NASB). Then, indicating His disciples, He says: "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister

and mother” (vv. 49–50, NASB). Jesus says that His true brother is the one who does the will of the Father, not one who simply makes a decision to follow Him.

We should always keep in mind that nobody forced Judas to become a disciple. Judas chose to follow Jesus; he made his own decision to enter the school of Jesus, and he stayed with our Lord during His earthly ministry for three years. Yet we are told that he was a devil (John 6:70). It wasn't that Judas was genuinely converted and then fell out of grace and was lost; rather, although he was close to Jesus, he was never a converted man. That ought to give us pause as we consider the states of our own souls.

A little later in the book of Matthew, Jesus gives an explanation of His parable of the sower. It is one of the rare times in the Gospel accounts where we are given an explanation of a parable. That explanation is most helpful because this parable differs from normal parabolic instruction. Most parables have just one point. It is generally dangerous, therefore, to turn parables into allegories, which tend to have symbolic meanings sprinkled throughout the story. But the parable of the sower approaches the level of an allegory as Jesus makes several points of application.

Jesus begins His explanation by saying: “Hear then the

parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path” (Matt. 13:18–19). The first group He is talking about is represented by the seed that fell on the path. In antiquity, at planting time, a farmer sowed his seed first, then plowed the ground. But any seed that fell on a roadway or pathway was not plowed under. Lying on the hardened path, it had no way to take root, and was devoured by birds. Jesus likens the birds to Satan. Many people are like this seed. They hear the preaching of the gospel, but it makes no impact on them. It does not take root in their lives.

Jesus continues, “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (vv. 20–21).

If you go to an evangelistic meeting or watch one on TV, you may see huge crowds thronging to the front of the church in response to the call of the gospel. In fact, I once saw a report about a massive international evangelistic campaign in which millions of people supposedly had made

decisions for Christ. When I read that, I wondered how many of those decisions for Christ were true conversions and how many of them were spurious. People like what they hear at these events and can be emotionally moved to make a decision to follow Christ. However, it is an established fact that many of those who come forward at evangelistic meetings soon abandon their commitments altogether. Their spur-of-the-moment responses are often groundless.

I don't want to be too harsh in my response to reports about the successes of evangelistic events. I recognize that all outreach ministries face the problem of measuring their effectiveness. Churches generally do it by reporting the number of members in their congregations and how much they have grown over a period of time. Evangelistic ministries often do it by reporting the number of people who come to the front, raise a hand, sign a card, or pray a prayer. These ministries want to have some kind of statistic to measure the response people are making.

But how does one measure a spiritual reality? Anyone who has been involved in evangelism knows that we cannot see the heart, so the next best thing is to count the number of decisions that people make. But Jesus warns us about that here in the parable of the sower when He says

that *many* people hear the gospel with joy—but they don't continue in the faith. This second type of seed falls on stony ground—ground that is so shallow the seed cannot put down roots, and as soon as the sun comes up, the seedlings begin to wither. The result is that they die away and never bear fruit. Jesus tells us that these people fall away because of the tribulations and persecutions that inevitably arise in the way of faith.

Explaining the third type of seed, Jesus says, “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22). This seed represents a category of people who also hear and receive the Word, but who are overwhelmed by the cares of this world. Like thorns, worldly cares “choke the word.”

Lastly, Jesus says: “As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit” (Matt. 13:23a).

Clearly, then, there are many who respond to the message of the gospel with joy but ultimately do not continue in the faith. Not everyone who hears the Word of God is saved, and the same is true for many who respond to it

initially. Those who are genuinely saved are those who prove themselves to be doers of the Word. When the seed takes root and grows, there is fruit.

### The Need for Fruit

In thinking about fruitfulness, we must remember that we are not saved by our works. Rather, we are justified by faith alone. Yet we also remember that the magisterial Reformers of the sixteenth century, such as Martin Luther, said we are justified by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone.

This view is at odds with the Roman Catholic schema, which holds that a person must have faith to be justified, but he also needs to have works. So the Catholic view is that faith plus works equals justification. But in the Protestant view, faith equals justification plus works.

*ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW: Faith + Works = Justification*

*PROTESTANT VIEW: Faith = Justification + Works*

In the Protestant view, works are a consequence, a manifestation of the state of grace we are in; thus, they add

nothing to justification. The only works of righteousness that serve to justify a sinner are the works of Christ. So when we say that we are justified by faith alone, we mean that we are justified by Christ alone, by His works; our works do not count toward our justification.

Some will say: "I guess that means that I don't have to bear any fruit. I don't have to bring forth any manifestation of righteousness because I'm saved by faith." But remember that the faith that justifies, as James tells us in his epistle (James 2:26) and as Luther argued, is not a dead faith; it is a *fides viva*, a living faith, a vital faith. True faith that connects us to Christ always manifests itself in works, and if there are no works on the right side of the equation, that tells us there is no faith on the left side of the equation. Sadly, if there is no faith on the left side of the equation, then there is no justification on the right side of the equation.

So faith links us to Christ, and if our faith is authentic, we won't come to the last day saying, "Lord, Lord," only to hear Him call us people of lawlessness. No, we will have fruit that demonstrates that our faith is real.

The amount of fruit Christians produce varies. Jesus says the good seed may yield "in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (13:23b). Some

true Christians are not as fruitful as other Christians, but every true believer bears some fruit. If he does not, he's not a believer. That's why Jesus says, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16a)—not by their professions.

When one is immersed in a Christian subculture that puts a great deal of stress on making decisions, responding to altar calls, and praying the sinner's prayer, it is easy to miss this important point—making a decision to follow Jesus has never converted anyone. This is because it is not a decision that converts a person; it is the power of the Holy Spirit that does so. We get into the kingdom not because we make a decision, walk down an aisle, raise a hand, or sign a card. We get into the kingdom because there is true faith in our hearts.

Don't misunderstand—there's absolutely nothing improper about public professions of faith; they should be made. Everyone who is justified is called to profess that faith; everyone who is a Christian is called to confess Christ before others. The problem comes when we make a public profession of faith the litmus test of our conversion. After all, Jesus speaks of people who honor Him with their lips while their hearts are far from Him (Matt. 15:8). No one has ever been justified by a profession of faith.

Does this mean, then, that the easiest way to solve the problem of assurance of salvation is to examine the fruit of our lives to determine whether it reflects consistency with a profession of faith? There is a definite place for self-examination in the Christian life, and I will say more about that in chapter 4. Yet none of us lives up to the full measure of what we say we believe. If we focus attention simply on our performance, authentic assurance becomes very slippery.

So it is possible to have false assurance, but true assurance can be difficult to acquire. How, then, can we know with certainty that our professions of faith are motivated by the possession of true saving grace? This question is extremely important, for it touches where we live as Christians and has a tremendous impact on our feelings, our comfort, and our behavior as Christians. It is imperative that we settle the matter of whether we are in a state of grace, and the remainder of this booklet will look at how we do that.