

Christianity: Religion or Relationship?

MATTHEW 10:40-42 NRSV *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*

When I first read the passage in preparation for today's sermon, I immediately connected it with that parable in Matthew 25:

MATTHEW 25: 34-40 (NRSV) *Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

I also thought of this text in Matthew 12:

MATTHEW 12:46-50 (NRSV) *While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

Do you see a pattern developing here in Matthew? Each text describes a relationship with Jesus: *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me..."* *"...just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me."* *"...whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

A cliché says Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship. So the question arises: How does one relate to Christ?

For two millennia, people have struggled with questions about what it means to be a Christian—to follow Christ—to be saved—to attain heaven and avoid hell...

I grew up with what we called the "Roman Road to Salvation."

- **ROMANS 3:10, 23—The human condition**: *"There is none righteous, no, not one." "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God."*
- **ROMANS 6:23A—The consequence of sin**: *"The wages of sin is death..."*
- **ROMANS 6:23B—The hope of salvation**: *"...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*
- **ROMANS 5:8—Humanity's hope in Christ**: *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

- **ROMANS 10:9-10, 13—The Sinners Response:** *“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... “For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”*
- **ROMANS 8:1—The Result of Salvation:** *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,”*

Some would call it “proof-texting,” but it’s good stuff: a summary (simplistic, perhaps) of what theologians call “salvation history.” But how does it relate us to Jesus? How is that sequence of Scripture passages an example of following Him? Believing, yes. Following?

Our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) emerged out of the American frontier during the first decade of the 19th century. Early in our history, an evangelist named Walter Scott devised what he called a “Five Finger Exercise” based on Acts 2:38.

He believed salvation requires faith, repentance, and baptism. He would enter a town, find a group of children, and ask them to hold up a hand. Then he would point to each finger and say, “Faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, gift of the Holy Spirit.” Once the children memorized the exercise, he’d send them home to tell their parents that he’d be preaching that same message that evening.

Again, it’s scriptural, and it summarizes the human condition in need of reconciliation with God. But how does it relate us to Jesus? How is it an example of how to follow Him? Believe, yes. Follow?

Belief—or the verb form, believe—is another strong and important part of the Christian faith. But does it relate us to Jesus? The epistle of James says, *“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.”* (2:19) Belief alone puts us at the same level as the demons.

I had an acquaintance some years ago who was an architect. He did graduate work at Georgia Tech in the early 1960s. He was working on his thesis and three copies were required—all original: no carbon copies. His thesis was 180 pages long, and at a dollar a copy he’d have to pay a typist \$540 for three copies.

He and his wife and small child were living on his part-time salary from an architectural firm, and their savings were getting low. He was anxious about running out of money before finishing his degree program.

When the office purchased a Xerox dry-process photo copier it was the first he’d ever seen, and he was amazed at the clarity of its print. He made a copy of one of the pages of his thesis (which was still in progress) and took the original and the copy to his faculty advisor, who approved the copy.

My friend was ecstatic! He’d have to pay the typist for only one copy at a dollar a page. He’d use the photo copier for the other 360 pages and pay the office

only 8 cents per page. He'd save over \$340!

He thoroughly believed Xerox would change the communication industry, and he enthusiastically declared his belief to anyone who would listen.

When he told me this story years later, he said, "You know, we still had \$2,000 in savings. Xerox stock was a dollar a share. If had *really* believed in Xerox like I said, I'd have taken \$1,000 out of savings and put it in Xerox stock. Can you imagine what \$1,000 of Xerox stock—in 1962, would have done for my family's financial future?"

He said he "believed" in Xerox. The act of purchasing stock is when belief becomes faith. James continues: "There is no faith apart from works." (2:17, 26)

The Roman Road to Salvation and the Five-Finger Exercise are valid elements of theology and doctrine. They describe specific approaches to personal salvation—a system of beliefs aimed at attaining heaven and avoiding hell; and there's nothing erroneous about them—as far as they go.

But, if that's all there is to your Christianity you're selling yourself short. You're still uninvested; still the same level as the demons.

There's a difference between being saved and being Christian, and the difference begins when we "buy the stock:" when we invest in our beliefs. Being Christian, *by definition*, is being like Christ—relating to Jesus, living as he lived, doing as he did—following him. It's the difference between belief and faith.

Matthew is clear in his quotes of Jesus: "welcoming the stranger, giving the cup of cold water... feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the political prisoner... doing the will of the Father."

It's not the cup of water or the food or drink or visit; those actions are, however, evidence that belief has become faith—evidence that we are invested in Jesus' call, "follow me". The giving of the cup of cold water is the act of faith that completes the process that begins on the Roman Road.