

Back To God – by Frank Barker

Christianity is the way, God's way to God -- our way of approaching Him and being accepted by Him. In simple terminology, what is the heart of Christianity and how does one become a Christian? To understand, we have to start with the nature of God.

COMMANDMENTS

God is holy. He gave certain commandments which are summed up in the Ten Commandments. Christ then summarized these into two: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:30). If we loved God with all our heart, we would never want anything wrong. If we loved Him with all our soul, we would never think anything wrong. If we loved Him with all our strength, we would never do anything wrong. If we loved God this total way all the time, we would be perfect. But, did you ever meet a perfect person? Only one man ever lived with that perfection - Jesus Christ.

And when we compare our life to His, we see how far we come short. That gap between our imperfection and His perfection is our guilt -- our failure to live our life as God said to live it. No wonder the Bible says, "All have sinned and come short" (Romans 3:23). Sin is breaking God's holy law.

CONSEQUENCES

Admittedly we have sinned, but how serious is our sin? If we break human laws, that has certain consequences. What about God's law? The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). This is speaking of spiritual death. If physical death is separation of the soul from the body, spiritual death would be separation of the soul from God, a separation that carries with it fearful consequences.

Notice it does not say "the wages of great sin is death" -- but just "sin"! That's shattering! Actually, since we have broken the very first and great commandment about loving God with all our heart, we are great sinners! You have sinned and I have sinned, and the wages of our sin is death. That "death" means our condition before God is terminal, a dreadful, final separation. Is there any escape from such condemnation? Is there any way we can get God to forgive us for our sin?

CHRIST

Frequently, people will say all we have to do is ask forgiveness and try to be better. Is that enough? Will such a remedy work? Let's use a comparison. Suppose you robbed a bank and got caught in the act. You're taken before a judge. The judge asks, "Did you rob the bank?" You answer, "Yes, Your Honor. I was caught in the act, but I've learned my lesson and I'm not going to rob any more banks, so I ask you to forgive me." The judge would say, "Forgive you? Why, you robbed a bank! If I forgave you, the law would lose its meaning. Everyone would rob banks."

If God forgave us for breaking His law on the simple basis that we were sorry and that we promised to try to do better, His law would also lose its meaning. Were this the case He could not have said, "The wages of sin is death." It would be mercy to forgive, but not justice. What we need then, is to find some way for God to forgive us and still be just! Going back to the court scene, suppose the judge said, "I believe you are sincere in asking for the court's forgiveness. However, if the law is to have any meaning, I will have to impose at least the minimum fine as your penalty. The minimum fine for armed bank robbery is \$5,000 or five years in jail." You answer, "Your Honor, I don't have \$5,000." "Then you'll have to go to jail."

Although you don't have \$5,000 there is a way you could go free that very day with no strings attached. I'm your friend and I pay the \$5,000 for you. Since I paid the penalty the judge could set you free and still uphold the law. Could it be that something similar has taken place in God's holy courtroom? No, I could not pay your fine in God's court because I am also a guilty sinner. I am in the same predicament you are in. I have to find someone who was not guilty to bail me out.

Only one person has ever lived who was not guilty before God and that was Christ, God's Son. But we all know He died 2,000 years ago! So how can Christ possibly help us today?

The Bible says, "Christ died for our sin" (I Corinthians 15:3). When He died, He didn't just die physically. Remember when He cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?" In His death He was undergoing some kind of agonizing separation from His Father; as I understand it, He was experiencing the wages of sin. In His death, Christ was paying our fine in God's court. This is the way God worked it out so He could be just when He forgives us. When God forgives a sinner He is not overlooking the sin, because full payment has been made. It's as if the Judge himself paid the fine by punishing His Son, Jesus Christ.

Further, Christ, as it were, did not pay just \$5,000 and leave you or me \$500 to pay. No, Christ paid every cent of the penalty for all our sins, even the sins we will commit in the future.

CONDITIONS

Does that mean everyone in the world is forgiven and does not have to worry about sin anymore? Not at all! When Christ paid the penalty in full, He paid it conditionally. The Bible tells us that there are certain conditions we have to meet before we are actually forgiven.

Let's return to the judge and the courtroom to understand these conditions. Suppose--when I paid your fine for robbing the bank--that I paid it in full, but I attached a condition: the judge was not to set you free until he felt that you meant business about not robbing any more banks. You, as the guilty law breaker, would have to meet that condition before you received the benefit of the payment. When Christ died for us He did something similar. He has attached two conditions for all sinners to meet: **repentance & faith.**

REPENTANCE

Repentance means that I recognize that I really am guilty before God because of my sin, that my desires have been contrary to His desires, and that I want to readjust my way of living in order to please Him. Thus, repentance is honestly meaning business about God's will being done in my life. It is a surrender of my will to His. Suppose I said to you, "How about turning over your life to me for me to do with as I see fit for the next three years?" "Me be your slave and you become my master?"

"Yes."

"Never!"

Believe it or not, that's the kind of surrender that's involved in real repentance. Christ becomes my master. I become His slave. Not just for three years, but from now on. Remember, we are talking about the alternative to "death," eternal separation from God. Have you ever made that kind of surrender to Christ? It's an essential condition to becoming a Christian. Jesus said, "Except ye repent ye shall perish" (Luke 13:13).

FAITH

The second condition is faith, or "believing in" Jesus Christ. Believing in Christ first involves believing His claims; that He is God the Son, that He died for our sins, and that He literally rose from the dead. However, we can believe these facts about Him without actually believing in Christ. Believing in Him involves one more step: a step of personal trust.

A surgeon could examine you and tell you that you had a brain tumor. He could even add that he could operate and cure you. You could believe all that information, but the information would not cure you. You would have to take one more step and trust him to operate on you. It is the same with Christ. On the basis of what we believe about Him, we must put our trust in Him to do what He offers to do for us; that is, to clear us from the guilt of our sins and to bring us into a relationship with God and ultimately take us to heaven. To illustrate such trust in Him, let us suppose three men approach the Gate of Heaven.

God says to each: "Why should I accept you into my heaven?" The first man answers, "I have tried to live a moral life." (That is another way of saying, "I'll stand on my record.") God would have to say, "I'm sorry, your record isn't good enough. No man's is. Had your record been good enough, I would not have had to send my Son to die for your record."

Now the second man approaches Heaven's gate and says, "I believed in your Son as my Savior, and I was pretty good. For these two reasons you ought to accept me." God would say, "I'm sorry, but you've contradicted yourself: You say you believed in my Son and trusted Him to save you, a sinner, but then added

that you were fairly good. That is getting back to your record. You stand with one foot on my Son and another on your record. That's like having one foot on a rock and the other on quicksand. You simply can't come into my Heaven by trusting your record -- that's what you need saving from."

The third man approaches the gate of Heaven. God says. "Why should I accept you into my heaven?" "There's no reason why You should let me in," he replies. "I'm a sinner. My record is horrible. But I understand that's why You sent your Son. He died for me. If I trust In Him instead of trust in my record, You promised I'd be forgiven. So I have!" And God says to him, "That's faith in my Son! Come on in!"

The Bible explains that salvation comes only "by grace through faith." Grace means it is Gratis: something I can't buy, beg or steal-something given to me that I didn't deserve. "For by grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). Once I receive God's great gift, I must try to do God's will, or I am not repentant; however, I must not trust in how well I have done His will, because that is unacceptable self righteousness.

When I come to God in repentance and with faith- meeting His two conditions-something happens. Something happens in heaven: I receive legal clearance, and I am legally adopted into God's family. God becomes my heavenly Father, and I become His spiritual child. Something has already happened in me! Christ has come into my life, and He produces a new quality of life. For this reason the Bible says that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:14). That does not mean my faith plus my works saves me. No, that would contradict the Bible's statement that salvation is given to us by grace and not by works.

What happens to me is that when I really trust Christ and surrender to Him, Christ really lives within me and produces His kind of works in my life as I walk in obedience to Him. A so-called "faith" that does not produce that new lifestyle is a dead, non-saving faith.

COMMITMENT

This all adds up to a second very important question: Have you placed your faith in Christ, trusting in Him alone? Think of the three different men who approached Heaven's gate. Which of the three best illustrates your thinking?

We can miss becoming a Christian either by failing to truly surrender our wills to Christ, or by failing to place our trust in Him. Have you met both of these conditions? Have you made that kind of commitment to Christ? Does your lifestyle evidence it? If you have not, but would like to be a real Christian, are you prepared to meet these conditions?

Why not do it right now? Pray like this: *"Lord Jesus, I am willing to surrender my life to You and accept You as my Lord. I want Your will to be done in my life. I trust you to forgive me, and I accept your forgiveness as Your gift to me."*

If you prayed that prayer and committed your life to Christ, don't expect to feel different immediately. Rather, count on the fact that Christ has come into your life. If your commitment was genuine, the change will come.

Now set out to grow spiritually by "food" and "exercise". The "food" is the Bible and books that will help you understand the Bible. Start reading in the Gospel of John. You will get your "exercise" by keeping a daily "quiet time" with the Lord, a time you set aside for Bible study and prayer. Then you "exercise" further by finding a good Bible-teaching church and getting involved in its program and with the people who worship God with you.

That, in simple terms, is the heart of Christianity and the only way a person can become a Christian.

Discussion:

1. Is it enough to just ask for forgiveness and try to do better? Why or why not?
2. Why did Jesus have to die? If God is loving, why couldn't He forgive us without Jesus having to die?
3. How does one receive the gift of eternal life?
4. If God asked you, "why should I let you enter heaven?" what would you say?
5. On a scale of 1 to 100, how certain are you that you would go to heaven when you die. Why?