

I'm Not Sure I'm A Christian. How Can I Know?

Glen Davis (all unmarked scriptures are from the NIV)

In 2nd Corinthians 13:5, Paul admonishes us, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?”

This is important, because at one point Jesus warned:

²¹"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22)

So how can we test ourselves to see if we are really in the faith? What does that even mean?

John, Jesus’ best friend, gives us three questions we can ask ourselves. They are repeated twice in 1st John, and each time they occur in the same order.

- 1) Do I behave? In other words, am I obedient to God’s commands?
- 2) Do I belong? In other words, am I a loving member of a Christian community?
- 3) Do I believe? In other words, am I committed to Jesus?

Here are the relevant passages.

Do I behave?	<p>1st John 2:3-6</p> <p>³We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. ⁴The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.</p>	<p>1st John 3:7-10</p> <p>⁷Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. ⁹No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.</p>
Do I belong?	<p>1st John 2:9-11</p> <p>⁹Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks</p>	<p>1st John 3:14-18</p> <p>¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.</p>

	<p>around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.</p>	<p>¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.</p>
<p>Do I believe?</p>	<p>1st John 2:22 ²²Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.</p>	<p>1st John 4:2-6 ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.</p> <p>⁴You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.</p>

I hope you read these verses and are reassured – that is what they are for.

But perhaps reading them causes you great distress. Perhaps you fail one or more of the tests.

What Does It Mean To Behave?

If you have been in church for a while, you most likely feel that you fail the test of behavior – you are not perfect and so you are afraid that the Holy Spirit is not transforming you. After all, didn't John say "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1st John 3:9)?

Two thoughts:

First, it's important to remember that you might have an overly-sensitive conscience. As John himself explains in 1st John 3:

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (1st John 3:19-20)

We see, then, that there are times that our hearts will incorrectly condemn us. As Hebrews 5:14 reminds us, “solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” And since we must train our consciences to accurately discern right from wrong, we need to expect that our consciences will sometimes incorrectly condemn or acquit us.

Second, John is not claiming that a single sin proves that our faith is false; rather, he is claiming that true Christians do not engage in willful and habitual sin.

This is why we read in 2nd Timothy 2:12b-13

If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
¹³if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

We can disown Christ (consciously choose to renounce him), but as long as we yearn for Him we are secure. He expects that we will be faithless (falter in our obedience) and yet He will remain faithful (He will not reject us for our weakness).

Pay close attention to what John actually said in the verse quoted earlier: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”

The verb phrases “continue to sin” and “go on sinning” are carefully worded. Those are attempts in English to capture the underlying sense of the Greek. A well-known paraphrase called *The Message* renders 1st John 3:9 this way, “People conceived and brought into life by God don't make a practice of sin. How could they? God's seed is deep within them, making them who they are. It's not in the nature of the God-begotten to practice and parade sin.”

We can see this borne out by John earlier in the same letter:

⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. ^{2:1}My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.
1st John 1:6-2:1

And so we see that John expects that Christians will sin – but he also expects that sin will not be the defining feature of our lives.

Are you a willful sinner who rejoices in breaking God's laws? Are you callous towards the conviction of the Holy Spirit? If you see a clear command in Scripture, do you repent of the times you have broken it and strive to follow it?

Do you behave?

Do I Really Need to Belong?

We often misunderstand what John is saying at this point. We hear about the need to love our brothers and we think of the brotherhood of humanity. That certainly reflects one strand of Christian teaching (we are called to love even our enemies), but it misses the point of these passages. John is writing about the family of God.

You can see that this is how John uses family language by examining his other writings. For example:

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (John 1:12-13)

And so our fellow believers have become our brothers and sisters – we have all been adopted into the same family. And since we are a family, we are to have a preferential love for other believers. This is why Paul instructs us

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Gal 6:10)

I am afraid that the question of love for other Christians is not convicting enough to many who name Christ as Lord. They seem to conceive of Christianity as an individual pursuit. They think of faith as their own personal journey, and if a church isn't sufficiently helpful to them then they'll just find a new church – or maybe even give up on the Church.

1st John 3:14 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”

The parallelism is clear: if you do not love your fellow Christians (your brothers, in John's language), then you are still dead in your sins.

Here's the rub: you can't love people you're not in relationship with. Love requires patience, forgiveness, and understanding. You must allow people to be close enough to offend you in order that you may have the opportunity to forgive them to strengthen them. And to be forgiven and strengthened in turn.

This is why we read elsewhere in the Scripture, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We must meet with other believers – and not just a few carefully chosen, pre-screened believers. We don't fellowship only with the Christian friends who really “get us” or that we really resonate with. We can't form an exclusive club. All Christian communities are meant to be permeable. We should be welcoming and embracing sinners all the time – and just like a family awaiting a new baby, we don't know how they will disrupt our carefully-constructed community.

John is particularly keen to draw attention to deeds that accompany love. 1st John 3:17-18, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

In other words, we must put our money where our mouth is. Will you go eat out with a friend that you know can't pay their own way? If you go on a church retreat and are able to do so will you give scholarship money to help someone less prosperous come along? Do you support missionaries? Do you loan people your car? Do you make your house available for people to sleep in? Are you hospitable?

Or do you just love with words?

So I ask you again– do you belong?

Exactly What Do I Need to Believe?

John is very clear that being a good person and being an active church member is not enough. We must also believe like Christians. 1st John 2:23 is explicit, “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.”

For many people, this raises an unsettling question: how much must one believe in order to be a Christian?

There are a few passages in the New Testament that are particularly helpful in this regard:

- And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)
- If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 8:9-10)
- Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1st Corinthians 15:1-8)

Synthesizing these passages, this is what you must believe in order to be a Christian. There are certainly more true things that you ought to eventually believe, but this is the bare minimum.

1. There is a God (Heb 11:6).
2. God wants to be found (Heb 11:6).
3. Jesus is Lord (Rom 8:9).
4. Jesus died for our sins (1st Cor 15:3).
5. Jesus was raised from the dead (Rom 8:9, 1st Corinthians 15:4).
6. The apostolic testimony to Jesus is true (1st Corinthians 15:5-8).

But, and this is crucial to understand, giving mental assent to these truths is not enough! You must be transformed by them. Beliefs give birth to behavior. It's easy to say we believe. It's much harder to show that we believe. Hence the other two tests: you must obey God's commandments and you must

love other Christians. We are still saved by faith alone through grace alone, but it is a faith that changes our actions and our thoughts. If our faith does not do that, then it is not the faith God requires of us.

In light of that - do you believe?

I Still Feel Uncertain

But perhaps after meditating on these three tests you still feel uncertain. Rather than reassuring you, they exacerbate your confusion.

You should consider the possibility that you really don't know Jesus.

It's worth pondering: read the entire book of 1st John and meditate upon it.

And it is also worth talking about with your friends: seek wise counsel.

Most of all, it is worth talking to God about: pray and ask God to pour the Holy Spirit in your heart.