

# What Makes Saving Faith Saving?

By Wendy Wood



Years ago as I was first starting off in counseling, I read an article by Tedd Tripp called “A Child’s Call to Faith”. Tripp’s goal in the article was to help parents understand the difference between their children having head knowledge and assent to the truth of God and His word, compared to a salvific trusting in God. The distinction between knowing, believing (assenting) and trusting is huge, though often mistaken. Understanding where our counselees fall on this spectrum is crucial to counseling well. While we don’t know other people’s hearts perfectly, examining the fruit of their life will give insight to the depth of their knowing, believing, or trusting God.

Everyone who comes to faith in Christ must have knowledge. A believer places their trust and hope in a Person. Knowledge about God, His attributes, His purpose in all things to bring about His glory, His plan for salvation through Christ are essential truths that must be known. Before a person can believe and trust in Christ as Lord and Savior, he must know that Christ lived a perfect life, was fully human and fully God, and was the atonement for sins on the cross that satisfied God’s wrath against us sinners for all who would repent and follow Him. Our job

as counselors is to continue to teach and provide knowledge of God through His word.

Our counselees need to know more about God. They need to learn about God's sovereignty and providence over all His creation. They need to know how God's holiness sets Him apart from all other beings and that His moral perfection is the very essence of His wrath and His grace. God describes Himself in scripture and it is our jobs as counselors to give our counselees a high view of Him. In the midst of difficult circumstances everyone needs to be reminded (or taught) about how great God is. Knowledge of Christ and His redemptive work is also essential to teach. Christ as the exact imprint of God gives us a clearer view of God's compassion and judgment on sin. Knowledge must precede faith. Faith is not to be in the absence of truth. We place our faith in God.

The Pharisees are a good example of people who stopped at knowledge. The Pharisees were experts in the law. They knew all of God's law from the old testament and knit-picked every single one. In Matthew 23 Jesus issues His seven 'woes' to the Pharisees. Each 'woe to you' is about how they knew the law, but didn't love God or others. Knowledge was not enough for faith. They focused on minutiae and ignored the larger Truth about God's attributes and purpose.

In the counseling room this sometimes shows up as the "know it all" who wants to debate the small details of law keeping rather than truly examining their heart and their relationship with the Lord. This person may be focused on whether creation was seven 24 hour periods or a more broad way of speaking about God's definition of days not being the same as our understanding. It may be someone who wants 5 steps to a better marriage but doesn't want to engage about their motives and root issues. But more subtly, it may be someone who has grown up in the church, has heard the stories of the bible their whole life, and has never gotten past the basics. This person may be convinced that they have saving faith because they know bible verses and know lots of facts about God and the commandments. They may have spent 20 or more years in church and bible studies and can quote lots of scripture. But none of those things are indications of salvation. A person can study facts about space and planets and know all the information about atmospheres, moons, and gravitational pulls but

that doesn't make them an astronaut. Knowledge is a necessary component of faith but is not enough on its own.

Believing is one more step down the road to saving faith. Believing is giving assent to the knowledge. Webster's dictionary defines assent as "to agree to or approve of something (such as an idea or suggestion) especially after thoughtful consideration : Concur". Where knowledge can say "I know that Jesus is the person Christians believe died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins" someone who believes that truth would say "I am persuaded that Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins". Where some might reject the knowledge outright and say "I don't believe that at all, it's just a fictitious story", a person who gives assent to this truth can approve and agree with what Christ has done. This is still not saving faith.

The demons believe that Jesus is God's Son and that He was sent into the world to be the Savior for all who would trust in Him. In Mark 5 Jesus comes to the land of the Gerasenes and comes to a man who lives among the tombs. As Jesus approaches this man, the demons cry out with a loud voice "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me" (Mark 5:7). The demons know who Jesus is! They address Jesus as the Son of the Most High God showing their belief in Jesus' power and deity. These demons know that Jesus can cast them out of the man they are dwelling in and are begging Jesus not to do that. A few verses later the demons say, "Send us to the pigs, let us enter them" (Mark 5:11). The demons have given thoughtful consideration to Jesus and agree that He is truly God. Yet, they do not have salvation. The demons will spend eternity separated from God in hell because they do not have saving faith.

In the counseling room we will often encounter those who give assent to the truths of God and Jesus. They will readily agree that Jesus is the Savior of the world and be able to see the difference in other's lives who are truly redeemed and transformed into Christlikeness. They will pray and ask God to do them favors, as the demons did in the story of Mark 5. They will want the benefits of being a child of God without the sacrifice and commitment necessary to be a follower of Christ. They may be confused as to why the fruit of their life is still producing anxiety, frustration, and broken relationships. They may be confused about why they keep struggling with anger and feel defeated by the on-going,

repetitive sins in their lives. They will by trying really hard to get biblical principles to “work for them” but not have the Holy Spirit indwelling them to produce genuine fruit. John Piper says, “But being persuaded that Christ and his promises are factual is not by itself saving faith. That is why some professing Christians will be shocked at the last day, when they hear him say, “I never knew you,” even though they protest that he is “Lord, Lord”. Believing that Christ and his promises are true, based on a testimony, is a necessary part of faith. But it is not sufficient to turn faith into saving faith” (Future Grace, page 199). This person is not truly in a relationship with God.

Saving faith comes when a person apprehends the truths about Christ in a different way. Saving faith is a genuine trusting of the Lord where who God is and what He is for us in Christ changes the way we live every moment of every day. John Piper is again helpful in explaining this truth. “This different way is what [Charles] Hodge calls a ‘spiritual apprehension of truth’. He says, ‘It is a faith which rests upon the manifestation of the Holy Spirit of the excellence, beauty, and suitableness of the truth... It arises from a spiritual apprehension of the truth, or from the testimony of the Spirit with and by the truth of our hearts’” (Future Grace page 199). When a person has saving faith in God, God is treasured, savored, delighted in.

Picture the parable of the hidden treasure from Matthew 13. When a person has the knowledge and belief of who Christ is, and is willing to sell all he has and pursue Christ alone, he has truly tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord through the Holy Spirit enlightening the eyes of his heart. This love of God, this delighting in Him, comes from the Holy Spirit and produces the fruit of Spirit in a life that is unmistakable as saving faith. The fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control replace the fruit of anxiety, frustration, broken relationships, and fear. “Another way to say it would be that, in all the acts of saving faith, the Holy Spirit enables us not just to perceive and affirm factual truth, but also to apprehend and embrace spiritual beauty. It is the ‘embracing of spiritual beauty’ that is the essential core of saving faith. This is what I mean by ‘being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus.’ Spiritual beauty is the beauty of God diffused in all his words and works - especially in the saving work of his Son. Embracing this, or delighting in it, or being satisfied with it, is the heart of saving faith” (John Piper, Future Grace page 205).

Apprehending and embracing is the evidence of a new heart and a new creation.

A counselee who knows, believes, and trusts (and delights) in God is a joy to work with. There may be ups and downs along the journey of counseling, but there is a genuine desire to surrender their will to God's will, a deep repentance for sin, a love of God's word and enjoyment of spending time with Him. Over the last 8 years of counseling, I see genuine believer's grow in their love for God through the counseling process. John Piper calls this "seeing and savoring" Christ. As our counsees see the truth laid out for them in scripture with the truths geared toward their specific sin or suffering, they see God as beautiful. As they see the beauty of His nature and understand His works at a greater depth, they savor the love, mercy, grace, and holiness of God more and more.

Picture yourself sitting down to your favorite meal. As you take a bite of your favorite dish you sit back, close your eyes, and experience all the details of the texture and flavors. You take time to think about how much you love this meal and even tell the cook how great it is. That is what savoring God should be. We should read His word and sit back, taking our time to appreciate how loving, compassionate, and merciful God is. We should take time to think about all the blessings He has given us in Christ and then exclaim to God how great He is in praise and worship. Giving voice to that enjoyment in prayer and praise grows our delight even more. The evidence of saving faith is the treasuring of Christ that transforms the follower of Christ from one degree of glory to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18).

As you start with data gathering and as you ask questions and listen to your counselee each week, be listening for the signs of knowing, believing, and trusting. It is only God through the Holy Spirit who changes hearts, but we can be faithful counselors who help our counsees see the difference between believing and trusting and lead them well into what it looks like to trust Christ in their circumstances.

Here is an analogy that I often use to explain this concept to my counsees.

Nick Wallenda is a professional and famous tightrope walker. He has walked across tightropes over the Grand Canyon and Masaya Volcano in Nicaragua without a safety net below him. In 2012, Wallenda arrived at Niagra Falls on June 15, and there was a huge crowd waiting to watch him work. I ask my counsees

to picture themselves in the crowd. As they watch the tightrope being laid out across the falls and secured carefully on the ends, what are they thinking? They watch Wallenda walk across the tightrope and easily cross Niagara Falls 1,800 feet above ground. As he comes to the end of the rope and safely gets down, they KNOW he can walk across a tightrope.

Then, picture Wallenda asking the crowd, “Do you think I can walk across the rope while pushing a wheelbarrow?” The crowd is cheering and screaming “yes”. The crowd is in agreement that Wallenda can do it and enthusiastically wants to see it. Wallenda gets up on the tightrope with the wheelbarrow and carefully walks safely across again. There are no wobbles or moments of doubt. The crowd now BELIEVES Wallenda is the greatest tightrope walker of all time.

For his third pass across the falls, Wallenda asks the crowd, “Who thinks I can go across pushing the wheelbarrow while a person rides inside it?” The crowd all cheers and replies “yes, we believe you can do it!”. Nick Wallenda then points at your counselee and says “get in and I’ll push you across”. Ask your counselee, “what would you do?” I often get a wide-eyed look, or that lightbulb moment look of understanding what trusting God looks like for the first time. Let your counselee wrestle with that thought.

Then follow up: That is the level of TRUST. Someone who knows the facts and gives assent to the truth is not really trusting until they are ready to give up their way of life for the truth. Trust changes the way we live. When we are trusting (seeing and savoring) Christ, we live in surrender and obedience to Him.

Jesus said “If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15). Treasuring Christ, seeing him as beautiful, glorious, and delighting in Him, leads us to want to please Him and live wholeheartedly for Him. Trusting involves action and obedience.