

Am I a saint already?

Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to destruction is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Mt 7:13–14, NJB)

I did not kill anybody, or set fire to someone’s house, or committed adultery. I go to church regularly, read the Bible and other spiritual books daily, and pray a lot. I fast on bread and water twice a week. I have travelled to hallowed places of worship on scores of pilgrimages. I took pilgrims with me, and they came home converted. I am far better informed on religious matters than my acquaintances. I gain deep insights into Scripture and theological studies by attending conferences; I always understand everything the speakers say, and thoroughly enjoy the programmes from beginning to end. I know all the standard formulary prayers, hymns and rituals; I can compose pious supplications and meditative thoughts instantaneously. I have been instrumental in organizing numerous devotional events. I donate thousands of dollars to worthy causes, help people who are in need, do multiple voluntary works expertly and say many holy things. Surely I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world, am I not? Surely my friends will speak of me as a saint after I die!

Right?

But have I paid any attention to the teaching of James quoted in the chapter above? “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.” (Jas 1:26, NIV)

When was the last time I opened my mouth to say malicious things against someone whom I consider inferior to me? When was the last time I spread vile rumours about the person I envy? How many times have I spoken angrily about those who did not agree with my brilliant observations?

If I am guilty of any of the above, then, according to Jesus, should I not be condemned? He warns, “A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings forth evil out of a store of evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Mt 12:35–37, NAB)

A person speaking good may be a good person, or may be an evil person pretending to be good. However, a person speaking evil is not a good person pretending to be evil; a person speaking evil is evil!

Do I deem anger, envy and pride – three of the seven deadly sins – deadly for others but not for me? Do I not know that angels became devils because of pride? Do I consider myself sinless as long as nobody seems to notice my sins?

God’s Judgment

James writes: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.” (Jas 2:10–11, NIV)

No wonder Jesus cautions: “I have much to say in judgment of you.” (Jn 8:26, NIV)

This is how he speaks to those who have the appearance of good but are not truly so. “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Mt 23:27–28, NIV)

“You are the very ones who pass yourselves off as upright in people’s sight, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed in human eyes is loathsome in the sight of God.” (Lk 16:15, NJB)

“You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.” (Mt 23:15, NIV)

Is it time to canonize myself?

Before canonizing myself, I should think about and remember the following.

“For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” (Mt 7:13, NIV)

“When the day comes many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?’ Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, all evil doers!” (Mt 7:22–23, NJB)

“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day.” (Jn 12:46–48, NIV)

“I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them. That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built. But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed.” (Lk 6:47-49, NAB)

“Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” (2 Jn: 8–9, NIV)

“Whoever teaches something different and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the religious teaching is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid disposition for arguments and verbal disputes. From these come envy, rivalry, insults, evil suspicions, and mutual friction among people with corrupted minds, who are deprived of the truth.” (1 Tim 6:3–5, NAB)

“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” (Jas 3:14–16, NIV)

Now, should I not examine myself more carefully, therefore, and in a totally honest and truthful way? Otherwise, should I not fear that, even though I may have been invited, I may have been chosen, and I may even be at the gate, in the end I may be locked out if self-satisfaction sets in?

Jesus already said: “Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” (Lk 13:24, RSV)

“When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!’” (Lk 13:25–27, RSV)

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.” (Lk 14:34–35, NIV)

“Many who are first will be last, and the last, first.” (Mk 10:31, NJB)

St. Paul asked: “What have you got that was not given to you? And if it was given to you, why are you boasting as though it were your own?” (1 Cor 4:7, NJB)

Should I crown myself today? Only a fool would do that. God alone can make saints – at the moment he chooses, if he opens the door into Heaven for me after a period of sincere self-examination, repentance and conversion on my part.

Repent; obey Jesus the Advocate

In the last book of the Bible, God warns me: “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked... Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.” (Rev 3:14–19, NIV)

John writes in his first epistle: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

“We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (1 Jn 2:1–6, NIV)

“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But 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. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 Jn 1:5–9, NIV)

Jesus says: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth.” (Jn 14:15–17, NAB)

Love

In Colossians 3:7–9, St. Paul says that I must put away all these things: anger, hot temper, malice, slander, abusive language, and filthy talk. “Stop lying to each other!” he cautions.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, he demands, “Follow the way of love.” (1 Cor, 14:1, NIV)

In chapter 13 of the same letter, he describes love as the highest theological virtue. Concerning this, I had better look inside my own heart seriously. And I had better not make these mistakes: to merely speak about the well-known passage without putting it into practice, giving advice, reciting the lines and using them to judge others instead of applying them to myself – none give any evidence of saintliness. But, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, if I meditate on the famous verses honestly, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, word by word, then change and carry out everything in them – towards everyone and at all times (even when nobody is watching) – then perhaps I will progress in the right direction.

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I

have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” (1 Cor 13:1–7, NIV)

Jesus promised

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.” (Jn 15:11–14, NIV)

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Mt 11:29, NIV)

Repentance

How many days does it take a person to be justified who sincerely repents from the heart?

Jesus spoke this parable. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other...” (Lk 18:10–14, RSV)

On the day that the humble person acknowledged his sinfulness, he arrived home justified.

Soon afterwards, Jesus travelled through Jericho. “And there was a man named Zacchae’us; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchae’us, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it they all murmured, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’ And Zacchae’us stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’” (Lk 19:2–9, RSV)

‘Today,’ the same day that Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ invitation, and made haste and came down from his lofty position, and welcomed Jesus joyfully, and reformed his ways, salvation came to him.

On Calvary, two criminals were crucified beside Jesus. “One of the criminals hanging there abused him: ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well.’ But the other spoke up and rebuked him. ‘Have you no fear of God at all?’ he said. ‘You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He answered him, ‘In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” (Lk 23:39–43, NJB)

‘Today!’ Again – for those who honestly admit their guilt and look to Jesus for mercy.

How long does it take someone to decide seriously for repentance? Not long! Nobody should spend another day on earth going through life staying as evil as before.

Guidance from Peter

“God opposes the proud but accords his favour to the humble.” (1 Pet 5:5, NJB)

“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.” (1 Pet 2:1, NIV)

“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble... For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.’” (1 Pet 3:8, 10, NIV)

Guidance from Paul

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.” (Phil 3:12–15, NIV)

“So, my dear friends, you have always been obedient; your obedience must not be limited to times when I am present. Now that I am absent it must be more in evidence, so work out your salvation in fear and trembling.” (Phil 2:12, NJB)

My prayer

Jesus, you said: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Lk 5:32, RSV)
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.