

Mark A McGee

The Gospel Few People Know

By

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The Gospel Most People Know

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Do you recognize this verse? It’s John 3:16, the most-quoted verse in the Bible. People hold up signs with John 3:16 written on it at football games, baseball games, hockey games, all kinds of sporting events. Christian athletes write John 3:16 in black under their eyes so cameras will capture the image when their picture is taken. The verse has been translated into hundreds and hundreds of languages. It has been called “The Gospel in a Nutshell.” But what kind of Gospel is it?

The gospel most people know is – God Loves, God Gives, I Get. That’s what most people understand John 3:16 (and much of the New Testament) to mean. God is a loving God Who gives His Only Begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but “get” everlasting life. People love to get things and many believe they are entitled to get things from God. I call the “God Loves – God Gives – I Get” gospel the entitlement gospel. People believe God owes them, so they are entitled to get things from Him – health, wealth, better job, love, good favor, things, stuff, etc.

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I have news for people who believe in an “entitlement gospel.” God does love them and does give to them, but His Love is not cheap. It’s free, but it’s not cheap. The Gift we receive from God came at a great cost – the Death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. People love to talk about God’s Love and Grace because it doesn’t cost them anything. They’ll quote the verses all day long – “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) Salvation is a gift – not of works, they say. True enough, but read the next verse – “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10) Salvation is free so only God receives the glory (e.g. “lest anyone should boast”), but free salvation does not mean a free ride from here to Heaven. We are God’s “workmanship.” Do you know what that word means? We are God’s “product” (poinma – that which is made, produced). We are the work of His Hands – created in Christ Jesus “for good works” (ergois agathois – works and tasks that are good in character, beneficial in their effect), which He “prepared beforehand” (proetoimasen – to ordain before, make ready before) that we should “walk” (peripatesomen – order behavior, conduct ourselves) in them. God did not save us just so we would have eternal life. He saved us for His Eternal Purpose! His Purpose is that we love Him, worship Him, glorify Him, exalt Him, obey Him, and serve Him. That’s not a Gospel people hear much about today, but it is the Gospel according to

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the Apostle Paul.

John 3:16 should be a clue that there's a John 3:15 and a John 3:14 and a John 3:13 and a John 3:1. In fact, there's a John 1 and a John 2. Developing an "easy-believism" salvation theology from John 3:16 alone is a dangerous thing to do, but people do it all the time. They build a personal theology based on taking Bible verses out of context. People who love John 3:16 because they think they are entitled to get things from God need to find out what John wrote leading up to John 3:16. It's not the entitlement gospel of "God Loves, God Gives, I Get." It's something quite different.

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The Word Became Flesh

The context for John 3:16 begins with John 1:1, which happens to be the second most-quoted verse in the Bible – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Every correct theology begins with a correct view of the subject. The subject of the Gospel of John is Jesus Christ – Who is “The Word of God.” John writes plainly that Jesus is God. Let me say that again – “Jesus is God!” Look what else John wrote about Jesus: “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” (John 1:2-3) Do you see what John is saying about Jesus? Jesus is the God of the Old Testament! The first verse in the Bible – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” – is about Jesus. Jesus Created the heavens and the earth. Isn’t that what John wrote? “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” Yes! Jesus is the God of the Old Testament. And it gets even better.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

The God of the Old Testament “became flesh and dwelt among us.” That is amazing! The God Who Created the universe became flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who created the

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flesh of animals, and birds, and fish, became Flesh and lived among us. The God Who took the dust of the ground and formed it into the flesh of the first human being became Flesh and lived among us. The God Who saved Noah, his family and a representative number of animals, birds and creeping things from the world-wide Flood became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who preserved His people in Egypt became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who brought His people out of bondage in Egypt became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who led the people of Israel through the wilderness in a Pillar of Cloud by day and a Pillar of Cloud by night became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who led His people into the promised land and defeated all of the kings of Caanan became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God Who united His people under the great King David became Flesh and dwelt among us. The God of the great prophets of Israel became Flesh and dwelt among us. "... and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

What happened when God became Flesh. What did He say? What did He do? What does He want? Do you think that maybe, just maybe, if the God of the Old Testament became Flesh and dwelt among us that maybe, just maybe, we should pay attention to what He says?

The Apostle John's Gospel makes it clear that the God of the

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Old Testament became Flesh and lived among His creatures (John 1:1-3,14). That is extraordinary! God loved the world so much that He sent His only begotten Son to earth to pay the penalty for our sins, and whoever “believes” in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. This Gospel is something we have to believe to have. If we don’t believe it, we don’t have it.

The Gospel of John addresses the issue of belief more than any other Gospel account – almost three times as often as the other Gospels combined! It begins with John the Baptist and God’s purpose for sending him as a herald of Jesus.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:6-13

John the Baptist was a witness of Jesus “that all through him might believe.” What did people have to believe? “... in His

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name.” These people who believed in the Name of Jesus were born “of God.” So, what does it mean to believe in the Name of Jesus? Let’s look further into John’s Gospel to see.

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.’ And John bore witness, saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.” John 1:29-34

The first to believe in Jesus was John the Baptist. God had told him how he would recognize Jesus – “Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him.” The next people to believe in the Name of Jesus were some of John the Baptist’s disciples. Those men quickly became Jesus’ disciples.

The root Greek verb for “believe” used in John’s Gospel is *pisteuo*. It means “to believe, to believe to be true and worthy of trust, be firmly persuaded of, trust completely, place full confidence in.” The word carries the idea of relying on

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something, not just acknowledging it. That is “key” to understanding the Gospel few people know.

Just as the God of the Old Testament proved Himself to people through signs and wonders, God in the Flesh also proved Himself to people through signs and wonders. The first sign that Jesus performed was turning water into wine; appropriate since Jesus came to transform lives. Many people claim that Jesus simply used slight of hand and misdirection to trick the simple minded people of the town of Cana into thinking he changed water into wine. Look at the facts – this was no trick.

“Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.’ And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, ‘Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!’” John 2:6-10

Jesus performed this sign – this miracle – at a public wedding.

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He did not meet secretly behind a barn. He did not take a few specially chosen people into the hills to show His abilities just to them. Jesus did this at a public wedding. He told servants at the wedding to fill six stone waterpots. Each one held 20 to 30 gallons of water. That means Jesus was working with 120 to 180 gallons of water. As soon as the servants filled the pots to the brim, Jesus told them to “draw some out now, and take it to the master of feast.” Jesus did not pull out a science kit and try some experiment on the water. He did not tell His disciples to run to the vineyards and bring back some grapes so He could squeeze the juice of the grapes into the waterpots and try to fool the people into believing He had turned water into wine. Jesus told the servants to draw some of the liquid out of the waterpots as soon as the water they were pouring in reached the brim of the pot. Pour in – draw out. Pour in – draw out. No tricks.

The master of the feast tasted the wine Jesus had transformed from water and immediately called the bridegroom. The master of the feast wanted to know why the bridegroom had kept the good wine until the end of the feast. The best wine was supposed to be served first, then after the guests had drunk plenty of that, out came the inferior wine. Jesus had transformed water into the kind of wine that was always served first at feasts. That’s what Jesus does when He transforms a life. He takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary.

“This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and

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manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.”

John 2:11

Turning water into wine at the public wedding in Cana was the beginning of many miraculous signs Jesus would perform during His earthly ministry. The signs “manifested” (ephanerosen - make visible, make clear, uncover, lay bare, reveal) His “glory” (doxan - the honor resulting from a good opinion, renown, splendor). Jesus “covered” His Glory during most of His earthly Ministry, but the signs He performed “uncovered” them to those who had eyes to believe. Jesus’ disciples saw the miracle in Cana and “believed in Him.”

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.” John 2:23-24

These two verses seem odd at first reading. Many people believed in the Name of Jesus when they saw the signs which He did, but Jesus “did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men.” You might think that Jesus would be thrilled that people were believing in His Name, but John wrote that Jesus “did not commit Himself” to those people. What does that mean?

The Apostle John knew the Greek language well by the time he

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wrote his Gospel account and used a kind of word play with “believe” in verse 23 and “commit” in verse 24. They are the same Greek word, with a slight ending variation. “Believe” is episteusan. “Commit” is episteuen. Jesus did not “believe” in the people’s “belief” in Him, so He did not “trust” Himself to them. Why? Because He knew all men; He knew what was in man.

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People today are extremely self-centered and self-absorbed. They think that what they believe is usually, if not always, right. If you don't think that's true, just ask them. Whatever they believe is what's true. Some people believe God is a big santa claus in the sky – eagerly waiting for the opportunity to give them presents. Some people believe God is always angry and has to be appeased continually. Some people believe God just wants attention and by giving Him a little attention from time to time (e.g. go to church on Easter and Christmas, toss a dollar into the offering plate, say a prayer at meals from time to time) gives Him what He wants and makes everything okay. Some believe all you have to do is mumble a few words, say a little prayer, and God won't send you to hell. Some people believe God just wants everybody to be nice and get along and as long as they do that God will welcome them into Heaven – where all the good people go. Some people believe God doesn't care what they believe and will open up Heaven for everyone at the end. Some believe that God sits on top of a big spiritual mountain and everyone who takes a spiritual journey up the mountain will eventually reach Him and find favor with Him.

That's the gospel(s) most people know. The Gospel few people know is that the only belief that counts eternally is **what God believes about what we believe**. People believed in Jesus because of the signs He did, not because they trusted Him for

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anything. To so many people then, and now, Jesus was just another show that came to town. What will He do for me? Will He make me laugh? Will He do what I want? Will He make me feel better about myself? Will He feed me? Will He heal my body? That's how most people see Jesus today. He's just another show in town. What will He do for me?

Jesus did not believe in that kind of belief back then and He does not believe in that kind of belief today. How do I know? Because Jesus said so.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” Matthew 7:21-23

Jesus is not kidding! There will come a day when many people who think they're saved and going to Heaven will ask Jesus, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” They're serious! They did prophesy in Jesus Name. They did cast out demons in Jesus Name. They did many wonders in His Name. And Jesus will say to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” That should stop

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everyone in their tracks when they hear it. Jesus is not kidding. Many, many people who think they're saved will not go to Heaven. Why? Because Jesus does not have faith in their faith. He knows what is in the heart of every person.

You may be thinking that this is out of context; that Jesus couldn't possibly mean that He would tell people who believe in His Name to depart from Him. Here's the context. Look at it closely. Everything in it leads up to the clear conclusion that Jesus is not kidding about faith. This is a life and death situation for all people.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not

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prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

What Jesus Knows

Jesus knew people believed in Him because of the signs and wonders He did. He knew their belief was not deep enough to withstand the rigors of discipleship. They, like so many people today, believed in Jesus for the entertainment and personal fulfillment value. Jesus changed water to wine. He fed thousands of people with a little boy's lunch and had more food left over than the boy brought to the table. Jesus healed people of every kind of disease. He gave sight to the blind and made the crippled whole. For so many people, Jesus was the best show in town. Jesus knew their hearts and did not commit Himself to them.

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’” John 3:1-2

The Gospel of John, as John wrote it, does not have chapter divisions or verse designations. John wrote that Jesus did not commit Himself to those who were believing in His Name because He knew what was in man. The next words John wrote are, “There was a man.” John 3 is an example of people who believed in Jesus “because of the signs and wonders.”

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the

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ruling Sanhedrin in Israel. He was also a member of the Pharisees, and as such, was anticipating the coming Kingdom of God. Nicodemus would have spent most of his life studying the Hebrew Bible, believing that living a life dedicated to God would prepare a place for him in the future Messianic Age. He came to Jesus by night. Why? Pharisees were “set apart” and had strict rules about who they talked to and why. As a ruler of the Jews, a daytime visit to Jesus might have been seen as legitimizing the Lord’s Teachings. Jesus had no “authority” to teach in the traditional settings of the elders of Israel, but Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a Teacher come from God – “for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” God’s Authority always trumps man’s authority.

If Jesus’ purpose in teaching was to win over the rulers of Israel to His side, this was His big chance. Nicodemus was the first ruler to express a real interest in the teachings of Jesus. How Jesus responded to Nicodemus demonstrates the true nature of the Lord’s purpose.

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ John 3:3

Jesus did not acknowledge the position that Nicodemus had as a ruler of the Jews. Even though it was dark, Jesus knew who He was talking to and His response shows a deeper concern for Nicodemus than for political opportunity. Jesus told

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Nicodemus the truth because He loved him. Nicodemus had a wrong understanding about seeing the Kingdom of God. He thought he would see it one day because of his piety, privilege and position in Jewish society. Nicodemus saw Jesus as someone who could help him in his climb up the ladder of ecclesiastical success. Jesus brought that crashing down around Nicodemus by simply stating that the Pharisee had to be “born again” in order to see the Kingdom of God.

As you might imagine, Jesus’ response was not what Nicodemus expected.

“Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’” John 3:4

What Jesus had said didn’t make sense to Nicodemus. How could a man be born again? How could he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born? It’s not possible.

Jesus did not apologize for what He had said. He did not try to take it back and explain in another way. In fact, Jesus went further so that Nicodemus would have no doubt that what Jesus was telling him was not about physical rebirth.

“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not

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marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” John 3:5-8

Not only could Nicodemus not “see” the Kingdom of God; he could not “enter” the Kingdom of God. Why? Because the Kingdom of God can only be seen and entered by spiritual birth – “born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus still did not understand what Jesus was saying.

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’” John 3:9

These are the last words recorded about what Nicodemus said to Jesus that night, but what the Lord said to him next had a deep impact on this ruler of Israel.

“Jesus answered and said to him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes

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in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 'He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.'" John 3:10-21

We hear from Nicodemus two more times in John. Most of the Jewish rulers wanted Jesus arrested, tried and killed for what He was saying about them, but Nicodemus knew there was something special about the Lord and spoke in His defense.

"Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him. Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, 'Why have you not brought Him?' The officers answered, 'No man ever spoke like this Man!' Then the Pharisees answered them, 'Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees

believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.' Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, 'Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?' They answered and said to him, 'Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.'" John 7:4-52

We have no record of Nicodemus saying anymore to his fellow rulers about Jesus, but that did not end his belief in the Lord. Nicodemus did an amazingly brave thing after the rulers of Israel conspired with the Romans to arrest, try and kill Jesus. What Nicodemus did was physically and politically dangerous. He went to the Cross and helped place the Body of Jesus in a borrowed tomb.

"After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury." John 19:38-40

On that remarkable day when Jesus died for Nicodemus and all others who would "believe in Him," Nicodemus helped prepare

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the Lord's Body for burial – and for Resurrection from the dead.

The New Testament doesn't reveal anything else about Nicodemus. He may have continued as a ruler of Israel or he may have lost his position because of helping to bury the Lord's Body. Nicodemus may have been one of the 500 who saw Jesus after His Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). He may have been one of the 120 who waited for the Holy Spirit in the upper room. We don't know what happened to Nicodemus, but I think the step of commitment he took to help place Jesus in the tomb was just the first of many steps of faith toward the Kingdom of God.

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Conclusion

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel that few people know. Jesus said that “many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14) The gospel that most people know – whether easy believism, legalism, works gospel, cafeteria gospel, entitlement gospel, emerging gospel, or any one of hundreds of other “gospels” being preached today – will not get anyone inside the spiritual Kingdom of God. There is only one Way in and that is **believing what Jesus believes**. It is not about whether we accept Jesus, but whether Jesus accepts us.

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13

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