

Q&A: Does a desire for forgiveness mean faith?

Anonymous asks:

If someone claims to be without faith, yet morally knows they have done something “wrong” due to our God given in built moral compass (even if said person chooses to not believe that God gave them the compass) and is looking for forgiveness, does that mean they have faith...? I guess they will only feel forgiven if they realise who they must submit to, which leads them to faith...? It is almost like our inbuilt ability to continually fall short of the inbuilt compass leads us to God. Smart design. Seek and you shall find.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

This question has come in response to our latest sermon series in the evening at St. Nic's. Thank you for it. You've put forward something very interesting. Let's unpack it a little, explore this hypothetical person's situation, and look to see where faith can be found...



You talk about someone who “morally knows that they have done something wrong.” This is an experience that is common to all people (excluding a sociopath or two) and is simply the operation of our conscience. Theologically, we can find the roots of conscience in our identity as image-bearers of God, *and* in the loss of innocence grasped by the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But our conscience doesn't depend on faith, it is simply a part of

who we are as human beings. Similarly, a pricked conscience doesn't necessarily lead to faith, or anything else in particular. We all know what it means to deaden our conscience, and harden our hearts.

However, there is also an experience that we might describe as "being convicted of sin." This something different to feeling guilty about something, it is about an awareness of a fractured relationship with our maker. It can feel like dread, but always has a sense of hunger to make it right, even if we are at a loss for words and aren't sure of what we can do about it. It's what is happening when the *psalmist* writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This is what is happening when Peter witnesses Jesus at work and *cries out* "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The big question is whether this sense of conviction is an aspect of faith. I think I'd like to turn it the other way around and consider how faith is present in the conviction of sin. After all, you cannot understand yourself to be disconnected from God's holiness if you don't have some sense of belief that God exists, and that he is holy. The longing for forgiveness is a longing for restoration of relationship, and for me, that is faith:

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)

True conviction of sin, a ministry of God's Spirit awakening our own, draws us to God in search of his grace, even if it is on our knees. And, as you say, "seek and you shall find."

The conundrum with your hypothetical person is that we see something of an existential wrestle: Clearly he is looking for forgiveness from someone, yet has "chosen to believe that God has not given them their moral compass." It's a tension

that can't last! Either what we are seeing is simply the operation of conscience, or it is true conviction and will find its end. In the meantime it is existential disequilibrium, and while it may take some time for it to resolve, that is what will happen. As you say, it's a smart design.

What is clear is that it presents an urgency to be ready with the gospel, in word and deed. If someone is seeking the path of reconciliation, we show them Jesus, and bear witness to how he has overcome the power of sin with newness of life. Conviction finds its end in Jesus as forgiveness and assurance, and that is very much the stuff of a life of faith.