

What Does It Mean To Be A Christian?

Mark 7:1-8,14,15,21-23

September 5, 2021

Peace to you all in Christ Jesus.

Think about this question for a moment. What does it mean to be a Christian? How would you answer if someone asked you that question? What kinds of things were included in your answer? Did you answer, "Goes to church often, or reads the Bible regularly, or attends Bible Class, or helps people who are in need, has an active prayer life?" I couldn't disagree. Sounds like a good Christian to me. Using our definition we could find people then and point to them and say, "There is a good Christian and there is a good Christian." We could also recognize the bad Christians. We could tell who definitely is not a good Christian, whether it be their lack of church attendance or the way they treat other people. So there now we know what a good Christian is like and many people in the world would agree with our definition. Everyone except Jesus.

The Pharisees who were following Jesus also found some bad Christians. These Christians were eating without washing their hands. Today we know that hand cleanliness is important for stopping the spread of bacteria and viruses. The Pharisees insisted on hand washing as a part of the rules necessary to be a follower of God. Similar to the signs one might see in a restroom urging that patrons wash using warm water and soap while rubbing hands together for 2 minutes, so also the Pharisees had rules about how to wash. When they observed Jesus' disciples eating without washing they were appalled, not just with the disciples, but with Jesus. For anyone who claimed to be a prophet from God must know and obey the proper rules for hand washing!

The problem was that these rules were just the rules of the Pharisees and had nothing to do with God's Word. In fact God's Word only required hand washing by the priests at the temple during certain times. There was nothing in there about regular, ritual hand washing. These hand washing rules were rules the Pharisees made up so they would be even more faithful followers of God than the average person, going beyond even what God requires. It was faithful following of all of the rules the Pharisees added which made a person a good follower of God and the disciples certainly weren't that, nor was Jesus.

Jesus quoted words written by the Prophet Isaiah 700 years before to condemn the Pharisees now, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." There were two problems here with

the Pharisees. First, they worshipped in vain. They were quick to make a public show of their rule following. They let everyone know they gave ten percent of all they got to God. They went to the temple and made all the sacrifices. They observed the Sabbath Day better than anyone else. Their prayers were done in full view of everyone so everyone knew. Their worship was nothing but a show to earn the favor of the people around them, and also to earn the favor of God. Their worship was useless.

The second problem was that most of their rules they followed and forced upon everyone else were rules made up by people not God's Word, including the hand washing. Remember that God chose the nation of Israel to be his special people and the people from whom the Savior would come. To keep them separate from other nations, God gave them lots of rules, ceremonial laws and civil laws we call them. For example, God told Israel that they could only eat animals that had a completely split hoof and chewed the cud. So by this definition beef was in but pork was out. No rabbits because rabbits don't have a split hoof, but the good news is the Israelites could eat grasshoppers and crickets! While other nations were free to eat whatever they wanted, Israel was restricted by God's rules.

The Pharisees thought that if keeping those rules really showed a person's devotion to God, adding more rules, like extra hand washing, will really show God that he ought to love us. But Jesus condemns them for it. "Your teachings are but rules taught by men." "No," Jesus said. "You Pharisees, on the outside you look like good followers of God, but your hearts are far from me."

And there, no pun intended, was the heart of the problem. Their hearts were far from Jesus. On the outside they looked like the best followers of God. They made a show of the giving, praying, and fasting. They were well-respected in the community for their religious piety. Yet Jesus could see that their hearts were rotten. They secretly loved money. They were proud. They were plagued by selfish ambition. Worst of all, they rejected Jesus as their Savior from sin. In fact, in their minds they had no sins to be paid for, thus really no need for Jesus. In the ultimate example of their hypocrisy, they refused to enter the Palace of Pilate on Good Friday so that they wouldn't become unclean, while at the same time they held hatred for Jesus in their hearts and desired him dead.

So let's go back to our definition of what makes a good Christian. What would Jesus think of our definition? A good Christian goes to church regularly, gives an offering, prays often. Notice that these are all outward things! None of these things addresses the most important thing! Being a good Christian is not about what we do for Jesus, but about hearts that are near Jesus. So is our definition of a good Christian a good definition? No, because it leaves faith in the heart out of the picture. Being a good Christian is not about hand washing and the food we eat or the number of times we come to church. Being a good Christian is about the inner attitude of our heart.

What is that inner attitude? I think it is best shown by Jesus in his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Remember in that parable the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' He was so proud of all he had done and he thought God should be too, but in his heart he was far from God. The Tax Collector however epitomizes the right inner attitude toward God, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

The Tax Collector knew he had nothing of which to be proud. He knew that he did not deserve to stand before God because of his sin. He knew that what he needed most in the world was God's mercy. All he could do was humbly ask for God's mercy. As for why God should have mercy on him he could only point to Jesus, to the cross, to the atonement made there for all of his sins.

Now dear friends, an important question for us is this: "Does the heart of a Pharisee beat in our chests? Are we like a dirty cup, clean on the outside but dirty on the inside? By nature we are absolutely Pharisees. For by nature our hearts are evil. Rotten to the core. It is not what we put into ourselves that makes us evil, by nature we already are and that is proven by what comes out of us. Jesus said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean' ... For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

In Holy Baptism God crucified our sinful nature and gave us new hearts with a new inner attitude that trusts in Jesus by faith. However we still have the old sinful nature with us and so even as Christians we rock back and forth between allowing our old sinful nature to win and the uncleanness of sin to come out of our hearts and the attitude of the Tax Collector who prayed, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Sometimes within the same minute of the day we can go between the one and the other. Jaroslav Vajda captured the struggle well in his hymn, "I see my heart's condition now, My heart's diverse affections. Why do I love the things you loathe; I'm torn in two directions: Now prodigal, now Pharisee. O God, be merciful to me; Who else but you can help me."

Dear people of God, there is no wickedness in our heart that the blood of Jesus cannot cover. John wrote, "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."

So what is a good Christian? A good Christian trusts completely in Jesus alone to purify us from all sin and to give us the gift of eternal life. A good Christian recognizes that in his heart there still remains the old sinful flesh and it must be drowned each and every day by repentance, by

confessing our sins to God and receiving his forgiveness. This inner attitude of the heart is what makes a good Christian.

But what about all that other stuff? Isn't it God-pleasing to be regular in worship, to read the Bible, to return to God generous offerings, to help those who are in need, to serve God through the church? Aren't all those good things? You bet they are, but those things flow from the inner attitude of the heart. Those are things a Christian does because the Holy Spirit has renewed in him a pure heart. The Christian does those things as a joyful response to God's love for him in Jesus. They aren't rules to follow, but byproducts of being a Christian.

You are a good Christian, not because of what you have done, but because of what God has done in you by his Holy Spirit. You are a good Christian because in your heart you trust solely in Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. What can God now expect from you? He can expect you to be regular in worship, to read the Bible, to return to God generous offerings, to help those who are in need, to serve God through the church, he can expect a bountiful harvest of the fruits of faith.

William Barclay, a minister in the Church of Scotland sums up the point of it all today, "There is no greater religious peril than the peril of identifying religion with outward observance.... Church-going, Bible-reading, careful financial giving, even time-tabled prayer do not make a man a good man. The fundamental question is, how is a man's heart towards God and towards his fellowmen? And if in his heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges, and pride, not all the outward religious observances in the world will make him anything other than a hypocrite." Amen.