

## When Christians Go Wrong (and when they go right!)

2 Corinthians 2 : 14 - 17

Someone once suggested that the biggest deterrent to belief in the God of Christianity was God's followers. People who claim to be one thing and then do another, people who sing and preach about love and goodness, but in their private lives are angry, abusive, greedy, and all the rest... Prominent atheists have been very successful of late in convincing millions of people that religion has been the reason behind practically every terrible thing that has happened in history. In The End of Faith, Sam Harris calls religion "the most potent source of human conflict, past and present." Daniel Dennett fears that "a toxic religious mania could end human civilization overnight."

And we've all heard the term 'hypocrite' before, haven't we?

And there is no doubt that hypocrites exist. In a message to his congregation (of about 9,000 people) pastor Adam Hamilton asked a question and made an observation that I'm going to try out on you: 'How many of you would consider yourselves to be Christians?' Just quickly raise your hand...

Ok, I'll say it: every one of you is a hypocrite. Let's just admit it and get it over with! I should say, to be accurate, "Every one of *us* is a hypocrite." The definition of the term *hypocrite* is someone who believes (or professes) one thing and yet does something else. And we all do that, don't we?

I deal in 'the Holy' every day of my life... so I should know better than anyone, but (and if this is news to any of you, I'm sorry to knock myself off your pedestal) there are way too many times when I just don't live up to what I passionately claim to believe – and do believe. I know it, God knows it ... you know it. I can get impatient, cynical, I am tempted to massage the truth in certain situations to make myself look better or to avoid conflict...let's just say that it's a good thing that we don't take Jesus' command to pluck out our eyes when they lead us to look at what we shouldn't ... or I'd be out of a job. I don't want to get too exposed here, but my point is, I know that I don't always do a good job of living out my faith.

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And by one definition, that makes me a hypocrite. And I suspect that you are all in the same boat as me. But – again as Hamilton points out – unless an unbeliever has no self-imposed standards of morality at all (an unusual circumstance) the odds are that they, too, are hypocrites. Because no one lives up to our own standards, unless they are very low.

As we understand the Biblical message, this shouldn't surprise us. The Bible tells us that humans are fallen creatures: we have this inner 'brokenness' that makes it a certainty that we are not always going to live up to *any* standard of goodness. And this is a critical point for today's message: the church is not a showcase for the righteous, but it is a hospital for sinners. You hear people say, "I don't know about *you*, but...", well, in this regard, I'm pretty sure I *do* know about you – you come here because you recognize our common need for grace and mercy; you come here because you hear the call of Christ and that is the life *you want to live*. Whether or not we hit the mark consistently or not, there is something compelling about the Christian 'ideal'. It is compelling, and it constantly calls us to something higher. Something better, something to reach for, even if we miss it on a regular basis.

Our inability to live up to that high calling does nothing to diminish its power, its beauty, or its compelling nature. Our failures make us more determined to be molded into the people God calls us to be in Christ Jesus. I like to say to those who think they are shocking me by telling me that the church is 'full of hypocrites' that there is always room for one more, and maybe together we can work out something better for ourselves.

Yes, there have been occasions in history where Christians have 'gone wrong', times when people have done horrible things in the name of faith – believing they are acting for God. The Inquisition, and witch burnings in Europe ... bombing abortion clinics; the church's implicit support of slavery in early US history by the silence of many and the misuse of Scripture by others; by the churches' refusal to oppose Hitler, until it was very late ... the Christian treatment of women, the hateful intolerance (and fear) that is still happening against those who do not accept our views or whose lifestyles make us uncomfortable – these are all examples of

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“Christians gone wrong”, and we need to account for this in some ways.

[Although I might add that Dinesh D’Souza in What’s So Great About Christianity? has a couple of chapters which powerfully refute the contention that religion – particularly Christianity – is the cause of all evil, by pointing out that secular and atheistic governments and individuals have been the perpetrators of evils just as horrible, and in fact, worse, when you consider the scale of their crimes.]

But my point is not at all that ‘Christian’s sins are less heinous’. Sin is sin, and Jesus himself said, “*To those who have been given much will much be required.*” There is an expectation of a high moral standard that comes with picking up your Cross and following Jesus.

Paul says that teachers of the faith will be held to a ‘stricter judgment’ – again, because of the understanding that the Christian faith holds a high expectation for the behavior of its followers. The reason why history remembers the evils of the Church, and why so many people can remember what a self-professing Christian once did to them while at the same time ‘forgetting’ the huge failings of non-Christian people is that the world loves to point out the failures of believers. It is a way of dismissing the claim of Christ on *them*. It is sad that we so readily provide fodder for these attacks.

The thing that I think is so important to remember in all this is, again, one of those ‘forests for the trees’ things... the sins of the church are glaringly evident because they so obviously represent something *other* than the true message of our faith. When Christians lie, and steal, and abuse people... and all the rest, they are *obviously* acting in ways totally contrary to the teachings and the example of the One whom we claim to follow.

You can choose where to look, and people will often see what they want to see. The truth to me, is that Christianity doesn’t look anything like the entity that people such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and others are describing.

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Last Saturday morning I heard a knock at our front door. When I answered I saw a youngish woman standing on the step, smiling at me. There was a man and some young children behind her; I was trying to take it in, because she looked kind of familiar, and she seemed to know me. And she spoke, “Do you remember me?” – and I recognized the voice, and the faces (except for the children, who were all at least 5 or 6 years older than the last time I had seen them.)

This was a family of former refugees from Kosovo. If you remember, around 2000 the US started to accept hundreds of families who had lost everything and lived in terrible danger during the Baltic civil war. This family was one of those displaced families, and they found a place to live in the house next door to us (when we lived at 533 – now Pastor HY’s home).

When they arrived, they were completely lost. They spoke virtually no English, had no income... and they were afraid. When we (Dianna and I, and the Holdens – all neighbors) stopped in to visit, and welcome them the day they arrived, most of them hid in other rooms. At first. I remember that it was a hot day, and someone produced Popcicles and then children started to appear out of the woodwork, it seemed.

Well, the people of FUMC did what we’re here to do – we shared the love of Christ through words and actions. Mostly actions. This was a Muslim family, and they barely spoke our language anyway. We communicated somewhat in halting German at first. I can’t even list all the things that were done for them, partially because I know I didn’t see most of it, but mainly because I just don’t keep track of these things. But I remember bags of groceries that would appear on their doorstep – with envelopes of cash hidden at the bottom. Fans for their windows... furniture for them to sit on.

The Dad – Fati - found a job and was walking to work, I asked the church if anyone had a bicycle that he could use, and one showed up that afternoon. Dianna spent hours with Luliletta, with an Albanian/ English dictionary in hand trying to communicate... I remember lots of laughing. Dianna taught her how to shop in an American supermarket (where small quantities are typically not the best buys).

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Their kids were enrolled in school, and helped by FUMC people the entire time. A little baby was born while they lived here, and he had a congenital problem that required frequent hospital visits and surgery (which is why this family ended up staying in the US after most of the rest have returned). People from this church arranged for transportation and provided food while he was there. I remember standing in a circle in their living room with the entire family and a number of FUMC people as we prayed for Edon the night before his surgery.

Well, this family is now living in Marlton. Fati is a handyman, working hard, and Edon is growing up, doing well – all recovered. But we sat out on our deck on Saturday morning, and here's what Fati said: "We just stopped by to let you know that we are doing well." (Their English is exceptional, by the way!) And then he said to me and Dianna, "We will never forget what you did for us. When you [to me] took Edon to the hospital at 3 AM that meant so much to us..." (I'll be honest with you, I had completely forgotten about that.)

I didn't tell him that, but I said to him, "Fati, that's what we're supposed to do – to love our neighbors." "Ah", he said, "but that's not always the case, is it?"

See, my picture of Christianity is not the misuse of people, and not those who take advantage of others – in the name of God. My picture of Christianity is not those people who are narrow minded, judgmental, mean-spirited representatives of the faith – and we all have known people like that. I think it is fair to say that we've all *been* people like that at some points in our lives.

But this isn't what Christ called us to be and we know it. We are called to be the "Light of the World"... we are called to treat others as we would want to be treated. We are commanded to love as we are loved, to forgive as we are forgiven. The example of Jesus Christ is an example of service, and sacrifice for the benefit of others and that is a high, high calling, indeed.

I may not always hit the mark, but deep in my heart, I surely *want to*. I can't think of any other calling that could rival that of the Gospel. I can't imagine anything better as a vision of life than living it as Jesus lived... a life of selflessness, of caring, of giving. A life of joy in its fullness.

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And while a lot of that is still under construction in me, still, it is a compelling vision. Of hope, of joy, of love shared. I will never give it up.

Yes Christians have gone wrong, and they will still. But when Christians get it right, the world benefits. Hungry people are fed. Sick people are ministered to. Outcasts find a home...

When Christians get it right, there are hundreds – thousands - of people who are still going to work down in Mississippi and Louisiana slowly repairing the damage of Katrina, long after most of the rest of the world has forgotten. Including many volunteers from this church. When Christians get it right, there are people like the 38 from our Church who paid good money and took a week of their vacation time to go work in rural VA, to shingle a roof in the middle of a rainstorm with some kids holding a tarp over others who were hammering shingles.

The homeless are sheltered and fed... when Christians understand what their faith is really all about. Children and young adults are taught who they are and who God is, by volunteers who share their faith out of love and joy; who want to see a new generation come to know the wonderful things that we have been privileged to know. So we have something close to 175 children registered for our VBS this year, paid for by your weekly offerings, staffed by volunteers.

We have Sunday Schools and youth groups, and bible studies, and work teams... Stephen Ministries, Heart to Heart and lots of one on one love. Words and action... sharing the love of Jesus Christ. That's what I picture when I think of Christians. I don't choose to focus on the few who get it wrong occasionally, I see the changes that come about in the lives of people who get it, who understand what the gift of God's grace really means for us.

When I think of Christianity I think of people like Doug Sell (who reluctantly agreed to let me share this with you). Doug has a heart for service. Through many mission trips, through volunteering a month to organize Katrina workers in Mississippi on site, leading a weekly work trip to a Native American UM church in Bridgeton this summer, to building row boats with inner city kids from Camden (that were launched yesterday on the Cooper River!).

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Doug told me recently that he has decided this year to not only tithe his money, but to tithe his time to God as well. One could say, “Well, he’s a good guy” (and he is) but I think that a better explanation (and one that Doug would endorse) is that God has changed his heart in Christ. He is not the man he once was.

And praise God – he’s not the man he *will be* either. Neither are you or me. Because we are people of a high calling. Pressing onward to be conformed into the image of Christ Jesus. Paul wrote in today’s Scripture: (2 Corinthians 2: 15 – 16)

*Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing. To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume.*

Dianna used to say, ‘You are the only Bible some people will ever read, the only picture of a Christian that some people may ever see.’ Paul agrees – as followers of Christ we are truly the presence of Christ in this world, and to many, we are the only contact they may ever have with the Christian faith.

We’ve talked about faith questions over the 7 weeks of this series – questions about science and suffering, disturbing Bible passages, how we view Scripture, the place of doubt in the life of a Christian, and lots of other stuff.

But truly, most people don’t decide about God on the basis of these things – they may play a part, but the bigger picture is formed by their contacts with people who claim to represent God. So, perhaps the most important question I might ask in all these messages is this last one:

What do people see when they look at you?

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