

How We Are Seen from Where They Stand: Are We Christian?

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This month we've been mostly looking at how we are seen from where they...non-Christians...stand. And that's required us to face some unpleasant realities...that we are not viewed very positively by many people in our society...at least in public conversation.

Here's an example... If you go to Google and type "How do I cook..." Google will suggest words to finish that question. On Friday the first suggestion was "turkey"...and the second was asparagus...which, being green, was never intended by God to be a real food anyway. 😊 You get those suggestions because Google tracks this information and puts the most frequent choices at the top. Which makes me wonder how many people frantically consulted Google on Thursday morning with a frozen turkey in front of them... 😊

Well, if you start the question "Why are Christians so...?" what kind of suggestions do you think you'd get? Let's look! Let's see the most frequent ways people finish that question on Yahoo... Google doesn't do this particular question anymore... as of this morning...

Not very encouraging, is it? Now, we've been quick to note in this series that the descriptions of Christians from "out there" don't apply to most of you good people. 😊 And that the criticisms may not always be fair. I was curious, then, to see if Christians tend to view each other the same way others view us, or even if non-Christians who know all of us would think a bit more positively of us, so I posted this same fill in the blank question to my Facebook page on Friday night and invited people to finish it. Some of you responded, along with dozens of others, Christians and non-Christians alike.

I was hoping to see some people say things like "Why are Christians so generous?" or "peaceful" or "compassionate" or "forgiving" or even "wise." And there were a few responses like that... all from Christians. But the overwhelming tone of the responses, from both Christians and non-Christians alike, was pretty again negative. "Survey says, Christians are Judgmental, Hypocritical, Narrow-Minded, Intolerant, and UnChristlike"...those were some of the top answers. Yikes! We've got some work to do! :(

One of the effects of this is that more and more people don't want to be Christians anymore. 😊 And many who do don't want to be CALLED Christians. I gotta tell you, I struggle with that word myself a bit, in part because it's used to define actions and attitudes that I don't want to identify with sometimes...and I'm pretty sure that Christ doesn't either. There are so many Christians who even go after other Christians who don't believe the way they do, act the way they do, or even hate the way they do. As a pastor and the leader of a seminary, I am enough of a public figure to be critiqued on a pretty

regular basis on whether or not I am living up to someone's narrow notion of being Christian. I have grown weary of it. :(Anyone else?

So what do we do about this? On my Facebook page I describe myself as a follower of Jesus...which is pretty much another way of saying I'm a Christian :) except that it puts the focus back on Jesus. But it also puts some pressure on me... if I'm going to say publicly that I'm a follower of Jesus, then dangone it I'd better act, look, or love a lot like him!...or else I'm being hypocritical...and contributing to that negative public image. I don't want to do that. I'm not perfect...I've got cracks in my sidewalk and broken panes of glass in my windows and blind spots in my rear view mirror....but I don't want to make you all look bad by how I live my own life...and I sure as heck don't want to make Jesus look bad. I point people to him!

Scripture says it this way, *"Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives"* (1 Peter 2:11-12 MSG). I like this because it assumes that people will not always understand us.... but that the goodness of our lives can, at least sometimes, overcome that prejudice to the point of them wanting to know about the God we love. And I should point out that the exemplary life Peter speaks of here is not primarily about being moral...it's about being those other things that people expect to see in us... that they actually WANT to see in us... compassion, generosity, forgiveness, peace, and all the rest of what Paul called the fruit of the spirit.

And when we live that way, we don't have to worry too much about the label we wear, or who is or who is out. Interestingly, Jesus wasn't as concerned about all that as WE are sometimes! Think about it... to follow Jesus he didn't require anyone to first agree to a statement of faith. He kept no membership list. He gave no mass appeals to join his movement, or even altar calls. He didn't even have a name for his "group"... other than "disciples"... which is from the Greek word for students, mentees, or followers...those willing to learn from him.

Jesus was not here to start a new religion in the way we usually understand that word. He wasn't looking for votes, or popularity, or members, or even large numbers of followers...whenever the crowd got too big, he would actually sneak away! 😊He was not here to draw people away from their lives to join his thing, but to announce that "his thing" had come to them!... that God was already with them and that they were already able to live in his kingdom... if they could see it, if they wanted it, if they were willing to embrace it. It wasn't "come out from among them and be separate" but "let God, who is already with you all, do his thing with you." All were invited, all were wanted, all were welcomed.

In the end, yes, there are people who want to live in the kingdom of God and people who don't. Some embrace it and some reject it...so some are in and some are out. But it's not because Jesus excludes them but that they exclude themselves from what God is doing. The great irony, the great scandal of the gospel, is that those who chose the kingdom are often the least expected... and sometimes they didn't

even know they are doing it. Jesus wasn't recruiting so much as noticing people living out the kingdom... the widow giving her mite, the leper who was healed and gave thanks, and blind man who argued with the Pharisees, the Syro-Phoenecian woman who wanted a favor, the Roman centurion who also wanted a favor, Zacchaeus the tax collector, and a bunch of other shady characters. These are types that make up the kingdom of God!

It seemed to bug the revival preachers in my childhood that Jesus didn't REQUIRE anything of these people... he seemed to be giving away the kingdom of God for free!... Yes, exactly. He honored those who were already living in it, invited others to join them, and asked nothing of them...except to follow him. He had little to offer them but himself, as the model, the proclaimer, and the instigator of the kingdom of God on earth.... Because what God wants, ultimately, is be one with us... divine and human in union, all walls of separation torn down, total and wonderful intimacy, a common will and a common heart, so that everything that is true of his character is true of ours as well! Jesus was that. And Jesus is the one who makes that possible for you and me as well. Christ in you, the hope of glory!

Those who wanted that union with God, those who chose to live more fully in the kingdom of God on earth, were eventually called Christians"...among other things....and we identify with them. That's our tribe, we say. Which means that others are not our tribe... that there are differences between Christians and those who are not. What are they? That's our second question today. The early church kept getting persecuted for those differences! There was obviously something about living in the kingdom of God and being one with Christ that is distinct from, and even off-putting to the status quo. Especially the religious status quo.

That's why those early Christians didn't have to worry too much about defining who was in... no one was in unless they were pretty darn serious about it! "Ah, yes, I'd like to join your group....and have my property confiscated, my citizenship revoked, have my kids sold into slavery, be blamed for everything that's wrong with the world, and then get fed to lions." :) What do you say to THAT? "Well, thanks, but you don't agree with us on Paragraph 72, section 3, of our statement of faith" ?? :) Later, when the Roman emperors became Christian, and suddenly being Christian was popular, the opposite issue emerged. Who's joining us because they really believe, because they really love Jesus, because they're really entranced by the kingdom of God?... and who's here only because it's smart to be seen at church, or because it's the thing to do now? That's when Christians had to get more serious about defining themselves.

We're in a transition time in our culture... it's no longer terribly popular to be a Christian, unless, perhaps, you're running for office. 😊But I do suspect that there is an advantage in becoming a bit less popular than we used to be. An advantage? Yes!... because it will eventually weed out many of those who really are just pretending a commitment to the kingdom of God. Those who are left will be in it for real... despite what people say about us, or even despite the messiness of the other people who share our love for Jesus...and then Jesus will shine brighter. I love how the apostle Paul spoke about the messy

ones in his own day... other Christians who were hyper-competitive, or ego-driven, or in it for bad motives...

It's true that some here preach Christ because with me out of the way [in prison], they think they'll step right into the spotlight. But the others do it with the best heart in the world. One group is motivated by pure love, knowing that I am here defending the Message, wanting to help. The others, now that I'm out of the picture, are merely greedy, hoping to get something out of it for themselves. Their motives are bad. They see me as their competition, and so the worse it goes for me, the better—they think—for them. So how am I to respond? I've decided that I really don't care about their motives, whether mixed, bad, or indifferent. Every time one of them opens his mouth, Christ is proclaimed, so I just cheer them on! (Philippians 1:15-21 MSG).

And that's why we cheer other churches here, no matter if we agree with them down the line, suspect their motives...or they suspect ours... or like the way they do things...or not. ☺ Jesus said to let the wheat and the weeds grow together; at the end of summer, they're all harvested together and the farmer does the sorting. The farmer is God. But what does the wheat look like, versus a weed? In other words, if we had to describe what a Christian is, what would we look for? Can we recognize our brothers and sisters when we see them? ☺ I think so. Jesus seemed to think so. And Scripture gives us enough clues to help us out with this. Let me offer a few of them to you this morning to see if they resonate with you...

First, a Christian is one who believes. In fact, we're often called believers...even in the New Testament. And there is some content to that belief—in other words, we believe some things to be true and we try to state what we believe. Those attempts to state it are called creeds. All of them are incomplete and imperfect... after all, we're using mere words to describe mystery. But they often point us in a good direction.

Here's the thing about beliefs, though... they must be experienced somehow in order to be real. When Paul says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10 NIV), he's not just talking about the doctrine of resurrection...he's talking about encountering the Risen Christ!... like he did on the road to Damascus. When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter blurted out, "You are the son of the living God!" It wasn't just getting a question right on a theology quiz...what Peter said was pure heresy to a Jew! Peter was declaring what he, at least at that moment, had experienced Jesus to be. Without that experience, what we say in our creeds or our confessions of faith...or our worship songs...is just blather... empty, meaningless words.

And Jesus didn't get overly specific about beliefs. He never said, "If you don't agree with me about how to do baptism, you're not in." Or, "if you don't have the right view of end times, or if you don't speak in tongues, or if you DO speak in tongues, or if you don't share my interpretation of Scripture"...or any of that. The earliest creed of the church was "Jesus is Lord!"...and that was enough. Christians just kept

adding to it over the years. They started for good reasons, of course. Every generation has its questions, and Christians in each generation attempt to answer those questions according to the best understanding we have. But what happens is that those answers...those attempts to clarify...eventually become lines in the sand that keep people out. "If you don't agree with our answers, you're wrong...and you can't be one of us!"

A few months ago some Christian leaders released a statement on human sexuality and gender. They said that if you disagreed with them, you weren't really a Christian. A bunch of Christians who disagreed with them responded angrily and said that if you didn't agree with THEM, you weren't really a Christian! Oh my! Are there any Christians left once they've kicked everyone else out? And, by the way, if getting this right is so crucial to being a Christian, don't you think Jesus would have said more about it? That's just an illustration. Here's the real question... Is possible to be a Christian even if you're wrong on something? Is it possible to love each other and worship together and serve together even if we disagree on something strongly?

Back in the early 4th century Christians were angrily divided over a single letter in the Greek alphabet... between the words homoousia and homoiousia. Were Christ and the Father "the same substance" or "similar substance"? Hundreds of thousands said "homoiousia," which we...along with the rest of orthodox Christianity... would say was wrong. But were they Christian? Did they not follow Jesus? Did they not desire the kingdom of God? Did they not declare that Jesus is Lord? Did they not suffer persecution alongside other Christians? How did God look at them? Get away from me!... you evil people who chose the wrong Greek word! Or maybe God understands even more than we do that we are dealing with mystery...and maybe the God of compassion has compassion on us as we attempt to grapple with it...and with each other. 😊That's what I think, anyway...but you can disagree with me and still be my brother or sister, and I'll love you anyway... even though you're wrong. 😊

So a Christian is one who believes...because he or she has experienced truth. A Christian is also one who trusts. That's the root meaning of the Greek word translated "faith" in the New Testament. Our faith is not a statement of beliefs, or a set of practices, or a religion... "I belong to the Christian faith"... but what we enough to base our lives on. How we live reveals our faith. I will be generous if I trust that God will provide for every need. I will be forgiving if I trust that I am forgiven. I will be kind if I trust that God is kind to me. I will love sacrificially if I trust that I am loved like that. It goes on and on... Where people poke us often for hypocrisy is how we glibly we say these things about God...and say them to other people... You just need to trust God... You just need to love more... You just need to let it go... and then don't do those things ourselves. That's disappointing to everyone, isn't it?

We trust because a Christian is also one who knows. Now, this can come off a really arrogant if we come at it from the wrong direction...and Christians often do act like know-it-alls, contemptuous of other beliefs and perspectives. We're not the only ones who know things...and sometimes what we think we know turns out to be just plain wrong. So let's be humble enough to acknowledge what we do NOT know...instead of always telling other people that they're wrong. This is one of the most tiresome things

that I experience with some Christians toward each other... always scouting for heresy, seeking out falsehood, denouncing something somebody said somewhere. Do you see Jesus doing that? No! The only time he does anything like that is when he's calling out the Pharisees for doing stuff like that. 😊

So what do I mean when I say that a Christian is one who knows? I mean it in the sense of "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." We have found something!... or been found by someone!... and so we have good news to share! And by the way, telling people that they're going to hell is not the good news of Jesus! :) He didn't do that! Look it up. The only people he ever warned about punishment from God were the arrogant religious leaders who thought that everyone else was in trouble but they weren't. Actual, real sinners... he gave them truly good news, not a gruesome, ugly threat. He offered them what he knew...the Father he knew... the power he knew....the love he knew... and he told us to do likewise. If it doesn't sound like good news, we're probably doing it wrong!

And that's because, fourth, a Christian is one who loves. The love we have is a direct result of our EXPERIENCE of the love of God. We speak of love because we know love. We give love because we have been given love. If we don't, we're not in. This is the most explicit definition of a Christian in Scripture....and it's stated more than once, so we don't miss the point. 😊Jesus said it, "*This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other*" (John 13:35 MSG). You've heard me quote that verse many times here... it's one of my favorites.

It's stated a bit more bluntly later: "*Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love*" (1 John 1:4:7-8 MSG). Notice, by the way, that it says that anyone who loves looks like the Father, even if they don't yet know all the rest of what we know about Him. This is radical stuff...most Christians actually disagree with Scripture here! Most Christians would insist that believing the right stuff and not loving is better than loving and believing the wrong stuff. But God seems to disagree! Hmmm....

By the way, Jesus never said that you had to agree with someone to love them. If they're your brother or sister in Christ, love them for that reason. If they're your spouse, love them. If they're your neighbor, love them. If they're someone you utterly detest and despise, if they're trying to do you harm, then they're your enemy. Love them too. 😊That's what Christians do. And, by the way, Christians are less concerned about "standing up" for things and more concerned about "standing with" people...whether they are right or wrong, Jew or Gentile, male or female, sick or well, rich or poor. Jesus didn't spend a whole lot of time trying to set sinners straight...God's love would do that in time anyway if they would receive it. It was not a lack of love but a surplus of love that motivated Jesus's actions. What about yours? And mine?

We're probably not there yet. But good news! A Christian is also one who grows. You see, there are two kind of hypocrisy. One is proclaiming one thing and intentionally living another way... people sniff that

out pretty quickly. So does God. ☺ The other kind of hypocrisy is proclaiming what one knows to be true and realizing, to your regret, that love still needs to be made perfect in you. I experience that every week, particularly in preparing these messages. I want very much to be able to speak with credibility, with integrity...and I want to get it right, so I don't lead you astray, but I have to deal each week with the realization that in the second sense, I am a hypocrite... still not perfect in love. I'm glad God's okay with that, even if some of his people are not. ☺ I've got good news for the rest of you!... if you're not perfect, welcome! We've got a whole roomful of people who are just like us. ☺ And God loves us dearly, and invites us to keep growing.

Finally, a Christian is one who lives! That's the whole point of it, isn't it? That we are made new... born again... we die to sin and come alive to God in Christ Jesus. So why do so many who call themselves Christians look so deathly, gloomy, and fearful? I don't care what you say... if you look like a tomb and smell like a tomb, you're probably dead! And there is no such thing as a dead Christian... there is only life in Christ on this side of eternity and more life on the other side. ☺ This doesn't mean faking it, by the way... I've seen too many Christians with pasted on smiles and fake happiness that doesn't last even the slightest adversity... and I've seen others who have had the world throw everything it has at them...and keep on living, keep on growing, keep on loving... why? Because they really believe it. Because they trust the One they have experienced. Because it's REAL for them!

Is it real for you? Are you Christian today? I'm not asking if you prayed a prayer at some earlier point in your life, or went to an altar, or if you agree with a confession of faith or if you say you're a Christian, or if you do Christian things like go to church... I'm asking if you are Christian. Not even A Christian... because it's not a noun so much as an adjective... it's a description of a person who sees what Jesus sees, loves what Jesus loves, and is being made more and more in the image of the loving God that Jesus proclaimed.

If not, good news!... you can become Christian, right here, right now. How do you do that? Open yourself to encounter the Risen Christ, who is already with you and for you, waiting on you to invite Him in. He'll take care of the rest. ☺

And if call yourself Christian and you want to push back, that's okay too. Spent some time talking with God before you pick on me ☺.. but we can talk more. It's possible I may be wrong. ☺ I am Christian... I don't have to be right about everything! I just get to love you. ☺

And maybe, just maybe, if we keep being Christian in the remarkable way Jesus taught us to be, those who stand out there and watch us will want to know about our Father too. That's our prayer, that's our challenge, that's your invitation this week! ☺ Go where he sends you, dear friends...and live the good news with your remarkable lives! Amen?