

Eight Ways to Be a Bad Christian

Make Christianity a Burden to Others

Luke 23:1-4

This morning I want to start an eight part series entitled “Eight way to be a bad Christian.” As I have been seeking God over the last number of weeks, I sense within me not only a call to do things differently but to take a look at what it will take for us to be a church that is evangelistic and reaching people in our community. Although, I am confident that God is capable to bringing in people through our doors, I cannot help to sense the responsibility to remain teachable and open to be what God wants from me.

All of us have times when we struggle with our faith. In fact, we have to maintain our faith otherwise we can walk away from it and disregard it as an emotional experience, or a crutch that we have leaned upon because we can't explain everything. But as we sit here this morning, let's be honest with ourselves, being a Christian is hard, it is challenging, it is painful at times. And if living in our faith is that difficult, then sharing that faith can become excruciating.

I am reminded of the words of Saint Francis of Assisi who stated, “preach the gospel, and when necessary use words.” The good news of Jesus Christ is to flow through our lives. Therefore, sharing our faith with others can be as simple as living the life of Christ before men without saying a word.

There are times when what we communicate about our faith has nothing to do with Jesus. Gandhi said best, “I like your Jesus. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Jesus.” One of the best ways to learn to communicate the true, living, life of Jesus Christ is to look at our lives and not fall into the trap that others before us have fallen into.

We find the perfect example in the ministry of Jesus in Matthew 23 which we will be looking at throughout our series. We find our first lesson in verse 1-4 (**Matthew 23:1-4**):

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. 3 So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. 4 They crush people with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.*

The Pharisees were the religious people of Jesus day. Yet instead of preaching a message of God's love and wanting to be the God of his people, they attached additional religious demands to God's words. They also heartlessly enforced these ceremonies, created from their own ideas, and brought burden and oppression with no reason. Can the same be said about the church today? Do we add to the Good News of Jesus with our manmade ideas and created inventions? I think it is sad to say that not only is the organized church guilty of such a thing, but the believers in Christ have done the same.

What does that look like? How have Christians made Christianity a burden instead of liberating, as the scriptures tell us?

In verse 4 the term “crush” is the word “burden” in other translation and has the idea of freight from a cargo ship. We can load people down so much that they can’t move and will give up trying to carry it. How could we possibly weigh them down?

1. Spiritual Expectations vs. Spiritual Disciplines

The word discipline has so many negative ideas attached to it today – some picture images of gritting one’s teeth and resolving to do something you know need to be done, but don’t want to do. When you hear the word discipline you may associate it with something you ought to do, as opposed to something you want to do.

Although we all know that drawing near to the heart of God takes work and what I have called spiritual preventative maintenance, the spiritual disciplines can turn into the “should-news” instead of the good news. People looking at the church can see that it requires too much effort without understanding the heart and purpose behind it. They can see it a things you have to do instead of things that are by choice and reap incredible dividends and understanding. In a book entitled, “Celebration of Discipline” Richard Foster writes:

The spiritual disciplines are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives. It is possible, however, to turn them into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death. As we enter the inner world of the Spiritual Disciplines, there will always be the danger of turning them into laws. But we are not left to our own human devices. Jesus Christ has promised to be our ever-present Teacher and Guide. His voice is not hard to hear. His direction is not hard to understand. If we are beginning to calcify what should always remain alive and growing, he will tell us. We can trust his teaching. If we are wandering off toward some wrong idea or unprofitable practice, he will guide us back. If you are willing to listen to the Heavenly Monitor, we will receive the instruction we need.

The spiritual disciplines are not bad in themselves, but are for a purpose. Sometimes people just see aimless activity with no reason, but if the purpose is explained and the heart for growth is communicated, then the disciplines can be embraced without any sense of duty but with desire. **The spiritual disciplines are for those with a desire.**

I have seen many times, when new believers come to faith in Jesus, I have seen the weight that seasoned Christians have put on them. These babes in the faith feel the pressure, they think they need to know everything, that they have to have everything in order, that they must without question sacrifice everything they struggle with all at one time, and instead of allowing them to find their path and relationship with God, they are clouded with expectations such as the spiritual discipline of reading their Bible, spending

time in prayer and listening for God, doing Bible study, going to church, serving the church and others, filled with guilt when they can't come through and relieved when they can. This is not the Christian faith.

In the New Testament, Christianity first started out as a Jewish religion only, but as the Gentiles (those who weren't Jewish) were coming to faith and their lives were changing, Paul wanted these Gentiles to join the Jewish believers but the Jewish believers were wanting to impose a religious expectation upon them in order that they could become a part of the church. Paul tells them however in **Acts 15:10-11**:

10 "So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? 11 We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."*

The yoke was the harness that was put on cattle to plough a field. Paul tells the Gentile Christians later in **Acts 15:28**:

28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements..."

I have known people who have literally gone insane and have had to seek counseling because of the overwhelming expectations from those within the church. Why would a searching soul want to take on all of this? In an interview with Jeff VanVonderen, the executive director of "Innerventions" and of Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resources, he writes:

Before we became Christians our performance and other people's assessments of our performance were really all we had to measure ourselves by. We live in a world that promotes that very heavily. It's the most natural thing we do. It's one of the first things that little kids do. They make stuff and then they show it to you and say, "Look what I did!" It's a very natural, normal and certainly not an evil thing to do. What the gospel does is that it says, "You can't do anything." And, "You don't need to do anything." That is not common sense in our world. In my opinion this is the "foolishness of the gospel that makes foolish the wisdom of the world." It's the too-good-to-be-true thing.

We resist grace because we are culturally programmed to focus on performance, on what we can do, on how responsible we need to be. But there is a second factor. When a person becomes a Christian, they have a heart that is warm toward God. They want to do the things God wants them to do. They care about that now. Even if they can't change their life around in the way they think they should, they still care about it now. And that makes them particularly susceptible to teaching that says, "You want to do God's agenda? Well, we know more about that than anybody, so we can help you. We'll tell you what God wants, and then you can work real hard to make that happen." Now, not only are new Christians susceptible because we all live in a world that is oriented toward performance.

They are susceptible also because spiritually abusive people can take advantage of their new desire to do God's will.

The good news of Jesus Christ is all about who he was, who he is and who he will always be – our Savior, our representative, and our rewarder. Paul warns the church in **Galatians 5:1**:

I So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

We can make our own Christian faith a burden if we aren't careful. We can fall right back into the performance trap and find that sense of duty instead of desire.

We are trying to bring freedom into a persons life, not bind them even tighter than they are already. We need to allow the grace of God and his rule, and to allow him to put the expectations on them, with his love and care.

Another way that we put burdens upon others is by giving a message of punishment versus grace.

2. A Message of Punishment vs. a Message of Grace.

We have all heard it - the voices of punishment to our nation about the coming of the Hurricanes and travesties in our nation as being God's way of punishing us. Since when did God change his method of reaching people with his love and grace and begin to take a punitive approach? Instead of people coming to God based on his kindness shown to them, people try to scare others into the kingdom with a message of fear.

You and I are not the Judge of this world are we? We cannot take a stance or position and make claims that we are not authorized to make. Jesus said himself in **John 3:17**:

17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

*15 You judge me by human standards, but I do not judge anyone. 16 And if I did, my judgment would be correct in every respect because I am not alone. **John 8:15-16***

*47 I will not judge those who hear me but don't obey me, for I have come to save the world and not to judge it. **John 12:47***

This is not the time of God's judgment, but a time of God's grace. God's grace and kindness is what draws people to God. God doesn't want people to be forced to make a decision to follow him out of survival, but he want people to turn to him out of gratitude and love.

I was recently reading a Christian magazine that talked about a true story that I think relates to this:

Recently I was in an airport when I spotted a young man in his 20's wearing a black T-shirt with the word, "INTOLERANT" in large white letters across the front. Below the word, the shirt read, "Jesus says..." My first thought was Uh-oh. Written across the back of the shirt in big, bold letters was: "Islam is a lie! Homosexuality is a sin! Abortion is murder!" You could see people rolling their eyes, thinking "those Christians... they're pretty messed up and angry." The whole experience reminded me of how essential it is to understand that even if we are expressing truth, how we express it is extremely critical. I am convinced that people in emerging generations actually want to be informed about Jesus and His teachings, even the ones that require repentance and change. But our approach makes all the difference. If we go around pointing out people's sins, the reaction will usually be negative. But if we share how we can become more loving and more like Jesus by changing certain things, then it is often accepted as a positive thing.

3. Imposed Conversion vs. Welcomed Discussion

I think one of the greatest traps of the Christian faith is that we expect people in our day to simply take our word for it without any discussion or answering any questions. I am reminded of a conversation me and Lynn had with a couple on our vacation (it was really eye opening and liberating at the same time).

So many of us expect to get our "canned" presentation of the Gospel out with an invitation and neglect to simply sit down and explain it. It takes time for people to understand God's purpose and plan for their lives. It takes time for them to embrace the Good News simply because it seems like it is "too good to be true." Some even expect the hammer to fall later on and that the hidden expectations are pulled out once we have got them in.

I think, at times, we put the burden of conversion upon people without taking the time to explain it. This requires us to be relational with people. We need to identify the world we live in and how we can best be prepared to answer their questions. **Things to consider:**

- A. We live in a post-Christian culture.**
- B. We need to develop a basic understanding of the different world views.**
- C. Be able to explain why not all paths lead to God.**
- D. Pray for God's intervention.**

When signing a contract, it is wise to read the fine print before you commit to something. Being in discussion with those who are searching shows serious consideration of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. **2 Timothy 4:2** tells us:

2 Preach the Word of God urgently at all times, whenever you get the chance, in season and out, when it is convenient and when it is not. Correct and rebuke your people when they need it, encourage them to do right, and all the time be feeding them patiently with God's Word. (TLB)

4. Pointing out the Problem vs. Being a Part of the Solution

In our text this morning in verse 4 of Matthew 28 we read that the religious leaders weren't even willing to lift a finger to help ease the burden. **The beauty of the church is that we no longer have to go through this life alone. Not only do we have our relationship with Christ, but we have a spiritual family with whom we can find comfort, nurture, encouragement, loving correction, and a common bond.**

We do not come together to judge each other. We do not come together to point out each others flaws. **We come together to lift each other up instead of tearing each other down. We all have problems and we know it. Yet, to come to a place where they are even more magnified by those around us is not a place of safety and security.**

My life is to be interconnected with yours and we are to find comfort, encouragement, and inspiration in the exchange of words and lives. That means that we all need to be humble, we all need to be serving each other, we all need to see ourselves on an equal playing field – brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us make this place a place where we become a solution instead of another stumbling block.

We can fall into the trap of being a barrier to the good news by being a bad Christian. To make Christianity a burden is to complicate the simplicity of the Gospel and it's power. Let us learn to make the church a place of truth and freedom and not expectations and demands. For truly the words says: He who the sons sets free is free indeed. Let's pray!