

What About Christians Behaving Badly?

That's A Great Question Series: Week 1

10/22/17

Welcome/Intro/Vision

This is a great week to join us, we're starting a brand new 5-week series called "That's a Great Question"

Where each week we're tackling some of the top questions that we get from people who are exploring faith, considering faith, or questioning faith

This series really started last spring when we hosted a seminar called "Exploring Christianity" there were about 15 or so folks who came each week and at the end of each session I had them write down their questions

We had some fantastic conversations that came out of their great questions

And I had lots of super-committed Christians who knew about the class who were asking me "what are you all talking about?"

And when I'd share about the kinds of questions people were asking, they'd totally geek out and ask to come and I'd tell them no, they had to stay far away!

I didn't want those super-committed Christians ruining this great class!

So we decided to bring this to the whole church

I hope that for each of us who are Jesus-followers, we might learn respectful, gentle, thoughtful ways of fielding and affirming people's great questions that come our way

But more importantly, we want to be a place where people who are on a journey of faith can ask their great questions and know that they'll be respected and taken seriously

And hopefully get some answers that will help remove obstacles to you engaging with a genuine life of faith

If you're here today and you wouldn't identify as a Christ-follower or you kind of would but you're kind of holding out because you've got all these questions or doubts or 'c'mon, seriously?' places when it comes to faith

We're so glad that you're here. You are welcome here.

Over the next few weeks, we want you to hear what we hope will be thoughtful and real answers that push past clichés

And our hope and our prayer is that these discussions will be used by God to help you to get traction in places where you get stuck as you consider Christianity

This is going to be a 5-week series, and here's the outline:

Week 1: What About Christians Behaving Badly, that's what we're talking about today

Week 2: What About the Bible? Can we believe it, can we trust it, what about all the violence and difficult parts?

Week 3: What About all the Bad stuff? We're going to tackle the problems of pain and evil, how can there be a good, all-powerful God when there's so much brokenness and awfulness in the world and in our own personal experiences?

Week 4: What About Other Religions and Spiritualities? What does Christianity say about other faiths, how does the Jesus story relate to other traditions or spiritualities?

These are the top 4 questions that come up regularly in our discussions with people who are on their journey of faith or exploring Christianity

But week 5, we're going to open things up: your questions

Throughout the course of the series, we're going to invite you to submit YOUR questions and for week 5 we'll tackle the questions that come up the most frequently that you give to us

In your bulletin is this tear-off comment card, write your questions, feel free to do some ballot-box stuffing by getting your friends and family to write your question in as well, and we'll tackle those week 5.

This week, we're tackling what for many of us is a more personal question than a theoretical discussion: What about Christians behaving badly?

For some of us, it's the Christians that we know or have seen or studied that are one of the biggest obstacles to you considering faith or Jesus

This plays out in many ways—for some of us, you've got people in your life who call themselves Christians who drive you absolutely crazy

Family members, co-workers, neighbors—and they're so self-righteous, so judgmental, so annoying and difficult that you think if they're Christians you don't want anything to do with them!

For others of us, it's not particular people that we know, but sort of this group of people that you're not sure you want to be associated with

For many of us the issue is that there's this group of people that all call themselves Christians, and that the media and others all lump together

And the way it looks from the outside, they all seem to think the same way, they all seem to vote the same way, they all seem to believe all the same things

And the ways that they think, you're not so sure about. And the ways that they all seem to vote, maybe you're not so excited about--or maybe you're VEHEMENTLY opposed to

And so one of the obstacles to you even considering Christianity is your impression of Christians in America, especially how they're portrayed in the media

you don't want anything to do with THAT group of people!

Still for others of you, it's not even just what's happening right now in our culture, it's the history of Christianity for the past couple thousand of years

There's all these abuses of power and the ways that people in the church have leveraged political power inside the church and outside of the church throughout history in ways that have clearly been wrong or abusive

There's a group of thinkers and writers called The New Atheists who argue that religion in general and Christianity specifically has done NOTHING but make life more miserable for people

And we'd all be much better off if all religious practice was eradicated from the earth

And their books are best-sellers! They're hitting a nerve!

So to start with, here's the only rational, sane response to you if your primary obstacle to Christianity is what you see of Christians in your personal life, in the media, or throughout history: GUILTY

Guilty, guilty, guilty—as a full-time religious guy, Christian religious guy, I am sorry for the ways people have hurt you and done damage to the world, sometimes in Jesus's name

You likely have every reason, based on your own experience or observation of Christians, to at the outset decide you don't want anything to do with them

As a group of people, over the past 2,000 years, we have fallen so incredibly short of the commands of our own Scriptures and the God that we claim to follow.

We have as a group made so many ridiculous and stupid mistakes along the way, said so many dumb things, done so many dumb things

that it would not be hard to build a case based on the Christians themselves that Christianity is full of messed up people that no one in their right mind would want anything to do with

In my own faith journey, the most difficult part of it for me at points has had nothing to do with Jesus or the Bible

and everything to do with the people who claim to follow Jesus but their actions sure don't look like Jesus-actions

or sometimes Christians will just do or say stupid things, especially in front of a microphone or camera or on your Facebook newsfeed—amen?

I think that the new atheists have identified something that's vitally important for us to deal with because it's the place where Jesus and the new atheists completely agree.

Jesus and the new atheists totally are on the same page that there is a particular dark power in religion that can be used and has been used to justify all kinds of things

Religion has been used throughout history by all kinds of people to justify and defend some of the worst atrocities and actions of individuals and groups

And sometimes religion gets used to create a tribalism mentality whereby draw a really tight circle between who's in and who's out

and we have permission because we have God on our side to treat those who are not like us just about any way that we want to.

Jesus knew that religion could generate this kind of a destructive tribalism

so at one point when he has an opportunity, he tackles this tendency to justify ourselves and our behaviors AND our tendency towards tribalism with a wonderfully creative and surprising story.

Bible/No Bible/Luke 10: some background—dropping in about mid-way through the professional life of Jesus as he's essentially traveling with his disciples and teaching at local synagogues and temples as he goes

And at this point in his ministry Jesus is totally trending. The crowds are getting bigger and bigger and the religious authorities in the establishment are getting more and more uncomfortable with how popular he's getting and the ways the he's not exactly feeding into the establishment

And so the opposition is growing and the questions are getting more and more feisty, which is what happens as we drop into this story

Jesus is likely in a home or a local synagogue and he's doing some teaching to a crowd of Jews, when we get this story

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Notice a couple of things: first, the man asking is a religious professional, he's all up in the religious institutions and trappings of his day

And the goal of the question here to test, to see if Jesus will pass the test or not.

There's all kinds of ways that questions can get asked, right?

If you've had teenagers, then you know that there are some questions that are not asked earnestly with a genuine desire to know what's true

And he asks a typical religious kind of a question: what religious stuff do I need to do make sure that I inherit eternal life, the life that's promised in the Scriptures.

Let's see how Jesus responds:

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

This is classic Jesus, especially when he knows or senses from the questioner that they’re not actually asking honest questions, they’re just poking and prodding to see if he’ll pass their test for giving the right answers

And let me say here, in a series called “That’s a Great Question” that for those of us who just like a good argument, who just like a good fight

the reality for many of us who are like that is there’s no question that Jesus can answer that will satisfy you

and it’s likely that what you’ll hear during this series, if you’re willing to listen, is you’ll get a bunch of great questions right back at you.

27 He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

Okay, so this guy is a total religious rock star! If this was a kids Sunday school class he’d get a sticker and an animal cracker for nailing this answer!

This is the classic answer from the Jewish scriptures about what God requires of his people and wants from his people

And if it had all ended here, if the man had received his animal cracker from Jesus and gone on his way and spent the rest of his life pursuing this way of life, what kind of legacy do you think he would have left?

But what he does next is so core to the human condition and so much a part of the human problem that it’s a gift that he keeps talking

even though he gets exposed in the process, because it’s going to help you and me overcome this same core condition we have in our own hearts

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Earlier this week I had a bad dad and husband day. I’ve been on a roll the past few months, but this week my stock was way down

I didn’t communicate about a scheduling thing, I didn’t tackle the list that I should have seen, and there was some conflict with the kids over some dog management—our puppy that is currently at points running our whole household

At the end of that day, all in one day, I was kind of in the dog house with everyone. Much of it was very much deserved

And at the end of the day, there was a conversation I was having in my head. You ever have one of those?

Do you think my conversation was a constructive one, where I was owning the problem, thinking about how best to apologize to everyone, and thinking about how to move forward with creativity, energy, and wisdom? OR door number two: do you think the conversation in my head was defensive and self-justifying?

Attempt to defend! Of course! Justify why I made the decision that I had made!

This man wants to JUSTIFY himself, to prove to Jesus and everyone in this crowd that he's on the right side, doing the right things

and I want to propose to you that this need to justify ourselves is one of the single greatest sources of human misery on the planet

You make a decision that some people around you don't agree with it or like it, so you start having conversations in your head JUSTIFYING your decision, defending it, explaining it

You always win those debates in your head, don't you? It's your home field advantage!

Or maybe you've seen a divorce go down with one of your friends—and if it starts to get ugly, what do the people involved do with the friends and family around them?

They go around telling everyone their side of the story

justifying the decisions that they've made often by making the other person out to be a terrible human being,

trying to rally people to agree with them, be on their side, to feel good about what they've done and what they're doing

OR, and this is strictly hypothetical, you might have to really stretch your imagination on this one: maybe you've seen an extremely contentious election go down. Ever seen one of those?

And in the run-up and in the aftermath, you know how right you are and how right your candidate is, and you know how wrong the other people are and the other candidate is

And after the election happens, no matter how you voted, you want to justify how you voted

So you gather as many people around you as you can who agree with you—that's your tribe—and they're going to tell you exactly what you want to hear, which is part of the reason why you gathered with them in the first place,

and you shout together how right you are and how wrong the other people are over and over and over again

All of that, so that you feel justified.

How well do you listen to anyone else when you're busy justifying yourself?

Whether it's the conversation in your head or the echo chamber of your Facebook newsfeed, all of us are building a world in our own image so that we might be able to justify ourselves

Do you know how many billions of hours and dollars are spent by all of us scurrying around trying to JUSTIFY ourselves?

Can you begin to see how exhausting this whole exercise is? Can you begin to see how much pain and damage this has inflicted on the whole of the human race for the past 5,000 years or so of our existence?

But what if there is a God. And what if that God saw that this insatiable need to justify ourselves was destroying people whom he loved?

And what if God did something that is the key that totally set us FREE from the need to scarp and claw to justify ourselves?

Can you imagine how much more free you'd be and I'd be, we'd all be, if none of us ever felt the need to justify ourselves ever again?

Can you imagine what would happen if instead of a world where we all have to scurry around justifying our existence, justifying our decisions

What if instead of all of that, God through his grace poured out free justification available for all of us?

What if we could be justified not by how many arguments we won or how well we performed in this life

what if we could be declared right and good and justified by God's grace, freely given to us—can you imagine how less defensive or anxious or threatened you'd be?

This is the essence of Christianity, this is the good news of Jesus. Jesus is God's gift to humanity to free us from our desperate need to justify ourselves and justify our existence on this planet

The man in this story is doing us all a favor with his question: he's grasping to justify HIMSELF, wanting to be able to check all the right boxes to prove that he's a good person—in his case it's religious boxes, for others of us, we've got other boxes

And what Jesus is going to do with this man's question is take this insatiable need we have to justify ourselves and turn it on its head by drawing a picture of what it truly means to walk with him—he's going to give us a picture of what it means to truly follow in the Jesus way

And it cuts against this need to justify ourselves with our own little tribes by calling us to step into a much bigger, much more important tribe.

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

This is about a 17-mile long stretch of road, much of it was wild and uninhabited in Jesus's day, so it's the kind of road that bandits and robbers would have laid in wait until unsuspecting people came by

³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

So the priests and the levites are both full-time religious people, and at the time there were these rules in place about what you could or couldn't do in the temple if you touched a dead person

If you touched a dead person you had to go through a bunch of hoops to re-enter the temple, they don't know if he's dead or not, but their desire to remain ritually pure and keep access to the temple likely drove their decision to not stop and be helpful

Now Jesus is telling this story both to this man, this expert in the law, and to this larger crowd of Jewish folks.

And it's likely that they're all hoping to hear that their OWN people come next and THEY are the heroes.

This expert in the law would have been in a different political camp than either the priests or the levites, so he's hoping the next person on the scene is an expert in the law who saves the day

Why? Because we ALL want to JUSTIFY ourselves and the people who are JUST LIKE US

Meanwhile, the crowd is full of ordinary Jewish people and THEY'RE hoping for an ordinary Jewish person to pass by and be the one who saves the day

Why? Because we ALL want to JUSTIFY ourselves and the people who are JUST LIKE US

But Jesus isn't interested in propping anyone up in his audience with artificial self-justification of any sort

So he surprises everyone with his choice for the third person to pass by this half-dead man:

³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

At this point, the whole crowd gasped. Nobody in the crowd was a Samaritan, nobody in the crowd liked Samaritans or trusted Samaritans, nobody wanted the Samaritan to be the good guy

A lot of history here, but the basic gist is that a thousand years earlier or so the country of Israel had a civil war

and the northern kingdom established a new capital in Samaria, and they sold out their faith and heritage and people time and time again to the point where the Jews in Jesus' day despised them

Jesus knows this, this is why he's using this guy as his hero. He loves this expert in the law and he loves the crowd too much to let them sit in their attempts and desires to self-justify

He's going to disarm their attempts at self-justification by exposing it and inviting them into something that's much, much better than their tribalism and their self-justification

He continues:

³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

This hated Samaritan goes over and above what was required, even leaving a huge deposit for the sick man to be able to stay and recover

he's leaving enough for anywhere from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, we're not exactly sure how much hotels cost those days—but it's a sizable amount

Jesus then turns to the questioner and asks another one of his wonderful, challenging questions:

³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

He can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan!"

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

All of us seeking to justify ourselves is the cause of many of the major problems in this world.

This is the reason why many of us, Christians included, behave badly. We want to be right, justified, approved of, so we rally people together around our cause, we're right, they're wrong.

When Christians fall into this trap, not only do we behave badly, in fact, completely contrary to Jesus's command here and lots of other places to love and serve those who are different from us

We're doing so because we've forgotten this core gift of grace, neglected grace. Christian people! You need to hear this good news and the world NEEDS us to hear this good news and live into it!

You don't need to justify yourself any longer! Your identity, your security, your sense of being important or valuable or loved is no longer built on your performance or how right you are or how many people you can get to agree with you.

You and I are free to be wrong, and admit it humbly, without getting defensive. My identity and my security are not wrapped up in having to be right, I'm justified not by my rightness but by God's grace

We are free from expending all this energy and money and time trying to justify ourselves, we are already justified, THEREFORE, we are free to love. Free to listen. Free to serve even people who are different from us.

We are free to be bold and courageous and wise and humble and generous-hearted all at the same time

The Jesus way cuts against the grain of tribalism and attempting to justify ourselves in any way that we try to do so, especially for those of us who try to justify ourselves by way of mere religious observance

Jesus says if you want to be my follower, you're going to love your neighbor in ways that look like this.

It's going to cut against tribalism, it's going to free you from merely paying lip-service to religious stuff while ignoring the pain of people around you, even the pain of those that you don't agree with, even the pain of your enemy

This is the Jesus way.

And so any time you see a Jesus-follower serving and loving their neighbor who doesn't look like them, didn't vote like they did, they're walking in the Jesus way

And any time you see someone who claims to be a Jesus follower who is merely using their religion to self-justify and circle the wagons and throw rocks at people who are different,

Or if they're walking past those in need without batting an eye, then you can be sure that they are NOT following in the Jesus way.

And to be perfectly honest, I miss this all the time. This includes me. I have fallen short of the Jesus way, and I must ask His forgiveness as well as yours.

In this one story, we see two crucial elements of the Christian faith that have everything to do with the stupid things that Christians do and that plague not just Christians but everyone

The first is this story exposes the exhausting and ultimately hopeless human attempts at self-justification

And it opens us up to this larger conversation: you and I will spend our lives in one of two ways.

We'll either spend our entire lives trying to justify ourselves, justify our existence, justify our decisions, justify who we are and what we did

OR we will spend our lives walking as people who have already been justified freely by God's grace

which then frees us in all kinds of ways, not the least of which is the freedom to love and serve our neighbor, even the one who is different from us.

And in this same story, we get a call to walk in this better Jesus way that is a radical call to love and serve our neighbor, even the one who is different from us

if Christians for the past 2,000 years had all walked in this way, this world would be a much better place, wouldn't it?

As a church, we've talked about becoming a community where this type of thing is happening in our community

and about being an instrument of grace where this kind of thing is happening through our community

We've taken a passage of Scripture where God promises his people that he's going to plant them and grow them up to be a noble cedar where all the birds of the air will make their nest and find their rest

And so we've been praying and dreaming and pressing on towards our church becoming a noble cedar right here in Chatham County.

We've been dreaming of creating a community where all the birds of Chatham county, all kinds of people are invited to participate to be a part of it:

Christians and seekers and skeptics and even haters, all backgrounds and ethnicities and all kinds

Democrats AND Republicans—let me say here a quick but risky word.

Some of you who are more on the liberal or progressive end of things politically can get the impression from the media and from Christians themselves that there's this whole package you have to buy into if you're going to be a Christian: it's Republican, conservative, Jesus

Let me say very clearly: there is no one Christian party. There are deeply devoted and committed Jesus followers in both parties, who are there because they see the good and they are there fighting against the bad and the flaws

For those of you considering faith for the first time or the first time in a long time, I want to encourage you to put a big, thick, heavy firewall between Christianity and politics

Following Jesus will affect your politics, it affects everything, eventually, but maybe not the way you think

And at the center of it all is Jesus; because a community of people gathered that looked like this, this is a recipe for conflict, frustration, and animosity and antagonism

Right now, our country DOES look like this and yet we CAN'T find a way to get along, can we? Right now, we're polarized, all trying to justify ourselves, often by gathering in our tribes and throwing rocks at other people

It is the grace of God through Jesus that justifies us by gift of grace that frees us from having to spend our lives justifying ourselves. That's what then frees us to love someone who's different from us

And this morning, we want to invite you to be a part of it.

Each week I close with what I call **this Week's Take-WITH**: one or two Wildly Important Take-Home questions or ways to apply what we're talking about into everyday life

This week's Take-WITH, I've got a couple for different audiences:

1. **Jesus followers**: how are you still wasting your time and emotional energies trying to justify yourself? What would it look like to let Jesus be the one who justifies you?
2. **Jesus followers**: how are you doing at loving your neighbor?
3. **Great Questioners (GQ'ers)**: Are you willing to lean into our community and go to Jesus with your great questions?

Over these next few weeks we're going to wrestle with more great questions: the Bible, the problem of pain and evil, great stuff.

We want to invite you to join us as we look to Jesus to answer these great questions, as we wrestle honestly with really great questions

The hope for all of us is that we might be surprised at how good Jesus is to meet us with sometimes surprising answers to our great questions.