

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

What Does the Bible Tell Me About Following Jesus?

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Matthew 4:19

Christianity needs to be rediscovered. Our faith has been hijacked by self-righteous and judgmental people. It has also been hijacked by those with a political agenda. What's more is that Christianity has also been lost in the malaise of church culture. As a result, Christianity has lost its fascination. We need to get back to the heart and essence of our faith. The best way to do this is to reflect on what the Bible really has to say about following Jesus.

Today's message will be help, but you are holding back because there are some things about the faith that turn you off. This message will also help those of you who have been Christians a long time, but have become disenchanted, cynical, and have stopped growing. I believe this message will help you get unstuck.

Christianity is Not About Following Rules but About Following Jesus

Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. When Jesus called the disciples, he didn't say, "Recite the Apostles' Creed" or "Follow these rules" or "Be good boys and girls!" He said, "Follow me!" In other words, "Be in relationship with me."

I know this is refreshing for many of you who grew up with a rigid understanding of religion and faith: "Follow the rules. Stay in line or God is going to strike you down. Don't do this and don't do that." That's religion, folks. Jesus was the greatest rule-breaker in history! Following Jesus is not about what we shouldn't do, but what we should do! Following Jesus is not about what we are against, but what we are for!

Besides, if you think the faith is about obeying all the rules and being perfect, you will be disappointed because you will always fail. But through a relationship with Christ, we are empowered by God to be the people He wants us to be. On our own, we can't understand God or save ourselves by following rules. This is why we need a relationship with the Savior of the world, who redeems us and empower us.

Only the Christian faith makes this claim about God—that God comes to earth as a human being to save us and to be in relationship with us. Religion reaches for

God; Christianity is God reaching for us. On our own, we could never understand who God is. On our own, we could never save ourselves. This is why God came to us. So you can try other religions and do guesswork about who this higher power is and what he wants with you. You can guess at what the purpose of life is and how you will become whole in this world. When you are in trouble or experiencing difficulty, you can reach and grasp for some force out there to help you. Or you can allow God to reach for you in Jesus and give you new life in relationship with Him. You can sense God saying to you, "Stop struggling. I'm here. I love you. This is who I am. I don't want you to know about me, I want you to know me. I don't want you to keep rules; I want you to keep my love in your heart and share it with the world. I want a relationship with you."

Christ is Perfect but The Church is Not

One thing we have to remember is that the one we follow is perfect, but we as followers are not perfect. The church is not perfect.

Maybe you have a neighbor or relative who comes over to your house every holiday and criticizes the church. Perhaps they bring up the same litany—the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the corruption of clergy, etc. Maybe some of them tell you they used to go to church but they got their fingers caught in the machinery of the church and have never been back. Someone got mad at them or they got mad at someone and, to their surprise, they discovered that the church is made up of imperfect people.

Allow me to let the cat out of the bag for you this morning. The church is made up of imperfect people because, as the old saying goes, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." There is no such thing as the perfect church. I often find people who are searching for the perfect church. My response is always the same: "There is no such thing as the perfect church. But if you find the perfect church and join it, it will not be perfect anymore!"

When people say they don't come to church because of all the hypocrites, that is the equivalent to people saying they don't go to gym because of all the

overweight people who work out there. Really? Next time someone complains about hypocrites in the church say to them, “Yeah, the church is filled with hypocrites. And there is always room for one more!”

Why did Jesus come? Think about it. Jesus did not come for perfect people. He came for imperfect people. You don’t need a bath if you are clean. Jesus came “to seek and save the lost”—to bring healing and wholeness to broken people. The church is not perfect, but we know the one who is perfect and he is working in our lives.

Even though the church is not perfect, she is still the greatest thing God has going for Him in this world and if God is going to do something profound in this world, He will do it through His church. Through our imperfections, the power and love of God is revealed.

Following Christ Is Not About Always Having the Answers

After 20 years of preaching and about 12 years of academic theological study, I have learned two irrefutable facts: There is a God and I am not Him! There is a God and none of us are Him! Now, that seems to be a rather simple thing to understand, but it is amazing how many people forget it. In fact, what troubles me most about Christians today is how many feel they have a monopoly on God. When you talk to some Christians, they think God can be summed up in a theological formula or a spiritual law. It’s like they have God in their back pocket. They may not think they are God, but they think they have God all figured out and if you don’t think of God on their terms with their language and their systems, then you are on the outside. The theological arrogance within the Christian landscape today is staggering.

God is bigger, wider, deeper, and longer than our finite minds can fathom. God cannot be contained by our language and formulas. If God were small enough for us to contain, He wouldn’t be worth believing in! God is mystery and uncontainable. God is bigger than our theological systems. God is bigger than our political ideas. God is bigger than denominations. God is bigger than the church. God is bigger than the Bible. Now, these things are important and they have their place, but they cannot contain God. Nothing can! All of our language of God is limited metaphor for his power, glory, love, and grace.

The older I get and the more I grow as a Christian, the bigger God gets and the more open I am to discovering the depth of who God is. I submit to you that all Christian growth goes in that direction. The moment we think we have God figured out, we don’t! God says through Isaiah, “My ways are higher than your ways, my thoughts are greater than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

And there is great comfort, security, and trust that come from this—that the God who created this world has got it in His hands. And this God doesn’t think like I do or you do. He doesn’t respond the way we would respond. God’s ways are higher than our ways. Sometimes it is healthy to live in the mystery of who God is. That God is bigger than us. We are not always going to have the answers and that’s okay. If we did, we would have pretty lame and shallow faith.

There are certain non-negotiables about God. We call that dogma—God is love; God is creator, redeemer, sustainer, etc. But after dogma, you have doctrine and opinion and these are flexible and up for debate. There is a relatively small amount of dogma about God and a large amount of doctrine and opinion about God. The sad thing is that much of the history of the Christian church is about the disunity which has occurred through the years over doctrine and opinion.

Keep asking questions. Grow with those questions. The answers you have today may be different from five years from now. Faith is a journey.

Following Jesus isn’t Easy but it’s Exciting

Christianity has a PR problem, especially in America. Christianity in America is often presented as religious self-help—that to be a Christian means finding a way to escape the harsh realities of life. Some folks believe that if you believe in Christ, you will just get the good stuff in life. The reality is following Jesus, if you are doing it right, is very difficult and will push you out of your comfort zone. Christianity is not escapism, a safety net, or a crutch. Following Christ is risky business. Following Jesus means sacrificing yourself for the love of others by the power of God.

In Mark, Jesus approached Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and told them to drop their nets, leave their successful fishing business, and follow him. He was asking them to leave what was comfortable and safe and follow him to change the world. What a risk! And you know what? They did! They could not resist the pull of Jesus to transform the world with love. They left the ordinary in order to do the extraordinary. Sure it was tough, but they were willing to take a leap of faith in order to find real meaning in life.

The way of Christ is the way of risk. To be a Christian is to risk, to love, to sacrifice for the sake of the world. Jesus doesn’t want followers who always play it safe. He doesn’t always want us to pray for comfort, ease, or stability. Jesus says to you and me today, “You want adventure? Follow me! You want excitement and meaning? Follow me!”

It’s not easy, but the bigger the risk, the bigger the reward; the bigger the challenge, the more exciting

the adventure. The more we lose ourselves for the gospel, the more we find ourselves. We need to move to the heartbeat of the gospel and live dangerously in the hands of God. That's where excitement and meaning are found.

The Bible is More Like an English Textbook than a Math Textbook

So often the Bible is seen as just a quick reference guide to spiritual answers and facts. I need this so I will plug in this verse like a mathematical formula and I will get what I need. All the answers are right there for me to look up like an Algebra textbook. Well, the Bible is more complex than that. The Bible is more like an English textbook. And what do we find in an English textbook? We find different genres of literature and ways to interpret those pieces of literature for our time today. Now the Bible is more than just classic literature, but the Bible is made up of different genres of literature that need to be studied and interpreted for our time today. There is a richness to the Bible. It can be interpreted in a variety of ways based upon where we are in our lives. We also must understand the context of scripture and why the author wrote the material.

The Bible becomes true as it becomes true in our own lives. The Bible is true insofar as we personally encounter its truth. The living word of God connects with us as we are willing to be open to its truth. When Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son, he did not intend for the listener to debate the facts of the story. Did that really happen? Was that based on someone Jesus knew? Did Jesus get the story right? No, Jesus wanted his listeners to find themselves in that story and encounter its truth for their lives. In the same way, the Bible was not inspired to be a book of facts, it was inspired to be a book of truth. There is a big difference. Everyone can receive facts, but not everyone is open to truth.

This is why just giving an atheist a Bible and saying, "Read it" will not guarantee anything. In order for the Bible to be true for me or you or anyone, we must bring one thing to the reading of it—Faith. We must be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our reading of it. You see, there is nothing holy about the Bible by itself. It becomes holy when we allow God to guide us when we read it. We don't worship the Bible; we worship the God of the Bible. Until you have faith, the Bible will have no meaning. But once you surrender your life to God, the Bible becomes a living and breathing book where you encounter God. It becomes a profound account of how God has related to the world throughout history and how God will relate to you today. It becomes a mirror where you see yourself and a light

showing where you need to be. It becomes "God-breathed" for you.

So how does God speak to us through the Bible? One way is by asking two questions when we read and study the Bible: What does this text say about God? What does this text say about God's will for my life?

Christianity is About Loving God and Loving Others

Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." –Matthew 22:37–40

Jesus' answer was revolutionary. He quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 (the Shema) and Leviticus 19:18. He said if someone follows these two commands he or she will keep the essence of the Law. Jesus was saying, "You want the Cliff Notes version of the Law? You want me to sum it up for you? You don't have to memorize all these little rules and laws and worry yourself sick. All you have to do is do two things and you got it. Here it is: Love God with all your being and love other people like you would love yourself. You do that, you got the Law down."

The Pharisees had lost their way. They had good intentions. They wanted to follow the Law, but in their desire to do that, they missed that the point of all those laws was to love God and one another. They missed the forest for the trees. In trying to fulfill the Law, they were disregarding their love for God and others. Sound familiar?

So many Christians get lost putting rules, doctrine, theology, and judgments over loving God and neighbor. They start off with good intentions. They take a stand and express their position. But often, over time, their position, theology, and ideas become more important than their relationship with God and others. It can happen to all of us. What troubles me about the Christian church today is how often we put interpretations of our faith over the heart of our faith. Theology and interpretation are important, but they never supersede the greatest commandment.

Jesus said that people will know we are his followers not by our hatred, not by our judgments, not by our theology, not by our pride, not by our interpretation of scripture, but by our love for one another. In glory, God is not going to say, "Well done, child, you were correct in the way you interpreted the book of Revelation Well done, child, you were part of a denomination that was my favorite Well done,

child, your theology was perfect.” No, God is going to say, “Well done, child, you loved me with all of your heart and you loved my children.”

Love is the highest law! Can you imagine how much energy the church would save and could use for better purposes by embracing Jesus’ call to release judgment and love the world? Imagine all the energy that is wasted when Christians launch crusades against something. Imagine saving that energy and using it for ministries and causes that infuse the world with the love of Jesus!

If the church spent as much energy taking care of the poor as we do on justifying prejudice, the world would be a different place. If the church spent as much time loving the least, last, and lost as we do on crusades against something, the world would be a different place. If the church spent as much time bringing healing and compassion to those who are suffering as we do on

debating the interpretation of scripture, the world would be a different place. If Christians spent as much time loving God as we do condemning those who sin differently than we do, the world would be a better place.

Christianity isn’t about defeating others who have different beliefs or spiritual preferences. Christianity is about introducing others to God and His love. It’s about loving God and others. Amen.

–Stephen Mattson’s article “7 Ways I Would Do Christianity Differently” was an inspirational resource for me as I wrote this sermon. The article can be found at www.sojo.net.



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