

“WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN? (#1): SIMPLY OURSELVES”

(Matthew 22:34-40; John 4:5-10, 19-24, MSG)

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1. Read Text: Matthew 22:34-40; John 4:5-10, 19-24 (THE MESSAGE) and Pray.
2. When you think of a Christian, what do you think of? What defines a person as a Christian?
  - A–Is Christianity primarily about holding certain *views* about God, or Jesus, or the Church? Or, is it primarily about engaging in certain religious *practices* like prayer, Bible study, or helping the poor?
  - B–In other words, is being a Christian more about *beliefs* or *behaviors*? ...more about what we *think* or what we *do*?
  - C–You know, of the over 10,000 religions in the world today, <sup>1</sup> most can be easily classified as being built primarily around either *beliefs* OR *spiritual practices*. <sup>2</sup>
  - D–But biblical Christianity is somewhat unique in that it emphasizes a nearly equal balance between these two things, so that a biblical Christian is essentially defined BOTH by what’s called “*orthodoxy*” (what one *believes*) AND by “*orthopraxy*” (what one *practices* or *does* with those beliefs).
3. And yet, far too often today what we tend to focus on is the “belief”-stuff: ...that to be a “good Christian” one has to believe this and that about God, or Jesus, or the Bible, etc., etc.
  - A–Now, don’t hear me as belittling beliefs. Beliefs are important. They give us a foundation for faith and living, and I for one don’t think we can believe just anything we want and still be considered a Christian – there ARE some fundamental beliefs that do define a Christian as a Christian (& we’re going to talk about some of these in January next year).
  - B–But at the same time, to reduce being a Christian simply to our mental assent to a certain theology, or set of doctrines or beliefs, is to ignore what the majority of the gospels and other New Testament writings actually teach about the Christian faith. <sup>3</sup>
4. You may know that the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were sticklers for believing “correct theology and doctrine” – in fact, the divisions in Judaism of the time between groups like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes were all disputes over beliefs and doctrine!
  - A–But despite their *believing* of “right things,” Jesus knew that what they *lacked* was a proper understanding of how to put those beliefs into practice in daily living.

B—And so, in today’s Matthew 22 scripture, when one of these leaders asks Jesus to identify the heart of what it means to follow God, listen to Jesus’ response in Verses 37-40:

“*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.”

C—In other words, for Jesus its not enough to simply *believe* the faith, but also to *practice* it by striving for TWO GOALS: (#1) love of GOD; and (#2) love of NEIGHBOR.

5. So, as long as we understand that “right theology and beliefs” ARE important, but (at least in recent times) have perhaps overshadowed the importance of “right practices”...

A—...for the next five weeks I want to share a sermon series called “What Is A Christian?”, in which we’re going to intentionally explore some of the *practices* of Christianity – how being a Christian is as much defined by what we *DO* as what we *BELIEVE*.

B—And its not that the *doing* of these things somehow magically *makes* us a Christian, but they can reveal both our *current* faith level, AND operate as *tools* to help shape and grow our faith as we live it out in the world around us.

C—So, during the course of this series, my aim is to “unpack” these two goals of “loving God” and “loving our neighbor,” and talk about several spiritual practices that can help us achieve them.

–II–

6. This week and next our focus is going to be on what it means to practice our Christianity first by “*Loving God with all our heart, soul and mind.*”

A—Of course, there are many ways we can do this. However, I chose the John 4 text as today’s second reading because to me, it captures the essence of one important way that we do this.

B—At the heart of this story, we find a Samaritan woman having a conversation (a debate, really) with Jesus about the essence and meaning of true “worship.”

1—And as I read it this week, I was struck by how similar it is to our conversations often about worship today: ...she was concerned with the external, functional parts of worship like proper *place* & style & format, just like we often argue about today.

2—But notice that when she began asking these functional questions, Jesus responds by inviting her to go a deeper, heart level – by talking about spiritual *attitude* and *motivation*, rather than getting hung up on issues of format, style, or place.

C–I particularly like how THE MESSAGE translates Jesus’ words in Verses 23-24:

*“The time is coming when... where you go to worship will not matter. ‘It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship.... Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.’”*

7. Now, there are several things I love about this reading:

A–First, it says that authentic worship should **“engage our spirit in the pursuit of truth.”**

1–So here is evidence from Jesus that biblical worship should enable us to *“love the Lord our God with our heart and soul (= “engage our spirit”), and mind (i.e., the pursuit of truth”)* – in other words: worship should engage our emotions, feelings, AND our intellect.

2–I don’t know about you, but I’ve been to far too many worship services that were either too full of emotional manipulation and hype, OR too full of ritualistic stuffiness and deadness – services where they either burn you up or dry you out!

3–That’s why it’s so important that we strive to offer worship experiences here at East Cobb UMC that will (hopefully) touch and impact both our heads *and* our hearts.

4–I know we may not always succeed, but that’s our goal, and that’s what Jesus says we all *need* as Christians – to worship as a TOOL to help us love God with our “heart, soul, and mind.”

B–But perhaps my favorite part of the John 4 text is where it says that authentic worship is about being **“*Simply and honestly ourselves before God*”** (where today’s title comes from).

1–In other words, worship is not about pretending to be someone we’re not, or pretending that we’ve got life all together when we don’t.

2–It’s not about a particular style or format (traditional or contemporary or emergent).

3–It’s not about the kind of musical instruments that are used, or whether or not there’s a video screen, or whether or not the preacher wears a robe.

4–It’s not about whether we sing the Doxology, say a particular prayer, sing a particular praise song, or even about the location **WHERE** it takes place.

5–It’s about being *“simply and honestly ourselves before God.”*

C–[STORY OF BOY “LOVING GOD”...]

A young boy was once seen going into and out of a church sanctuary several times in one day. Later, someone who noticed it asked him, “What were you asking God for when you were in there?” The boy replied, “Oh, I wasn’t asking Him for anything. I was just in there loving Him a little, and letting Him love on me!”

D—I wonder: ...does that describe you when you come to worship?

1—Oh, I know that we come for different reasons: ...some of us come out of habit, or because someone else made us, or maybe we're here to seeking answers for life.

2—And these are all okay to begin with. But there comes a point in our Christian maturing when we realize that worship is not so much a time to come and “get something” from God,...

3—...but is simply a time where God invites us just to be ourselves – to bear our hearts and souls to Him, to “*love Him a little,*” and let Him “*love on us!*”

8. What is A Christian? Well, I'm suggesting that a Christian first and foremost is someone who loves God with their whole heart, soul and mind through regular, consistent WORSHIP.

9. Let me end with a poem that I believe captures the essence of what it means to be “simply and honestly ourselves before God” in worship:

*“When I say, “I am a Christian” I’m not shouting, “I am saved!”  
I’m whispering, “I was lost” “That’s why I chose His way”*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I don’t speak of this with pride  
I’m confessing that I stumble Needing God to be my guide*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I’m not trying to be strong  
I’m professing that I’m weak And pray for strength to carry on*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I’m not bragging of success  
I’m admitting I have failed And cannot ever pay the debt*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I don’t think I know it all  
I submit to my confusion Asking humbly to be taught*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I’m not claiming to be perfect  
My flaws are all too visible But God believes I’m worth it*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I still feel the sting of pain  
I have my share of heartaches Which is why I seek His name*

*When I say, “I am a Christian” I do not wish to judge  
I have no authority; I only know I’m loved.”<sup>4</sup>*

10. [PRAYER: At end, invite congregants to put hands folded in lap and to say a breath prayer giving Jesus their heart and inviting Him into their life]

[AT HEARTLIGHT WORSHIP: Invite congregants to take the heart-paper they were given earlier and go to a prayer station to follow the directions there. As they go, know there are also prayer ministers available to pray with them about any specific needs they might have.]

**ENDNOTES:**

1. These statistics are cited by David B. Barrett in Encyclopaedia Britannica and World Almanac (See this article: "Researcher tabulates world's believers" by Richard N. Ostling, Associated Press, <http://www.adherents.com/misc/WCE.html> The 2001 edition, successor to his 1983 first edition, which took a decade to compile, identifies 10,000 distinct religions, of which 150 have 1 million or more followers. Within Christianity, he counts 33,830 denominations. Barrett also calculates religious populations for the Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year, standard estimates that are used in turn by the World Almanac and innumerable journalists. Such numbers are always debatable, but they're the best available. On the web site of adherents.com: <http://www.adherents.com/misc/WCE.html> Barrett's book, "World Christian Encyclopedia : A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World" is available for online browsing using the "search inside" feature on Amazon.com: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0195079639/>
2. Popular examples of the first category are Islam and Mormonism; examples of the latter category are Hinduism, Buddhism, and many of the New Age religions.
3. Read, for example, James 1:22-27 and James 2:14-26 (especially vs. 19).
4. Poem "When I Say 'I Am A Christian'," by Carol Wimmer (1988).