

“I have not yet figured out the Christian life”

Today we're wrapping up this series of messages where I've been coming clean about a few things. Pastor Mark did a little confessing last week, and he didn't get quite enough out so I'm going to tell you what he really needs to confess...Actually, Mark and I have a non-disclosure pact from seminary days. And I've got enough of my own stuff to confess.

So I want to wrap up today with a fairly general confession that gets lived out in some specific ways. And my confession today is that **I have not yet figured out the Christian life**. I know I'm a pastor, a paid religious professional and some people think that I'm supposed to have it all figured out so that I can stand up here and teach, and I can lead this congregation in its mission. But I don't have it all figured out. And I know a lot more about being a follower of Jesus than I put into practice. But I have not yet completely figured out the Christian life.

Now I will give myself **some** credit here. There are some parts of living the Christian life that I do well. I'm very dedicated to daily times in scripture and in prayer and I truly love those times. It's a rare day when I don't spend time in prayer and in scripture. I've figured out that I am more the man God wants me to be when I take that time.

I'm dedicated to serving others. I've got a lot of room to grow, but I've cultivated an attitude of seeking out ways to serve my family, to serve you, to serve strangers, to serve the world. I'm always looking for ways to serve people, with an encouraging word, an act of kindness, doing what Jesus might do in any given situation. I've got that pretty well figured out.

I strive to be authentic in how I live. What you see on Sundays is pretty much who I am all the time. If I were an ice cream I'd be Rocky Road, sweet and a little nutty. I have become more and more authentic in my emotions and in expressing my thoughts. I strive for the highest levels of honesty in all my interactions with people.

I would say that I live out the Christian life in my generosity. My wife, Janet, has helped shape this in me, but we love to give away our money to help people and causes. Depending on the year we will give between 15 and 20 percent of our income away. Mostly to the missions of our local church, right here. But also to helping agencies, schools, organizations we believe in locally and around the world. We don't have to do that; we love to do it; it brings us joy. It's a part of living the Christian life. (And I'm not bragging here, I'm telling you some good stuff in a minute I'm going to hit you with the bad stuff.)

I think I live the Christian life by striving to see the best in people. Even the worst offenders have some good qualities in them. In most cases, I can find them.

I think I live out the Christian life in my loyalty. Loyalty to friends, to family, to people I do business with. I do not give up easily on anybody or anything. I think I pretty much have that figured out.

A long time ago I heard somebody ask the question: If being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you? I think the answer would be yes. There is strong evidence in my life that I have chosen to follow the way of Christ. And not because I'm a paid professional in the faith. I believe I'd be in a similar place if at some point in the future I would choose another career. Those core elements wouldn't change.

So those are some places where I can say I have somewhat figured out the Christian life. But there are parts of the Christian life I have not yet figured out. And this is the hard stuff to talk about. There are some things I think I should have figured out by now. Like grudges. Just like everybody else in the whole world, I've had people burn me, and undermine me, and speak bad of me. Unfortunately it just happens. And though I'm able to forgive, sometimes I really struggle with grudges. I say I've forgiven somebody, but I find subtle ways to punish them, by ignoring them, or keeping them from being included. I haven't figured out how to completely overcome that. I should have that figured out by now and I don't.

And then there's the whole envy thing. Jesus said envy is evil. Paul said that it's the antithesis of love and an outright sin against God. Envy is wanting what someone else has materially, or in their abilities, or in their appearance, or opportunities. Envy is not harmless appreciation of what someone else has and wishing you had it too. It's allowing the desire to have the same thing become a barrier to relationship, a barrier to

love, a barrier to generosity. I've envied the abilities of other pastors. I've envied the homes of friends. I've envied the opportunities some people have that I don't. And I'm ashamed of that. I have made progress, but I have a long way to go. I don't have this part of the Christian life completely figured out.

I know I don't have the Christian life figured out when I'm petty, when I let the little things get to me. A couple of weeks ago I was a complete jerk to my wife because of a few little things that didn't go my way, that damaged my ego. Pettiness. I apologized to her from my heart. But sometimes the littlest things can really throw me off, and I hate that. Little comments people make; times when I feel ignored; times when I don't get my way.

But I know it's not just true of me. Some of you can be petty too. Pettiness comes from selfishness, an attitude that it's all about me. We forget to put God and others first. We want things done our way, or the way it's always been done. We're petty when we resist change, just because it's change. I like change...a long as I'm the one orchestrating the changes! But if somebody else makes those changes, watch me grump. I can be petty, and pouty when I don't get my way. If you're like me in this, we need to grow some thicker skin. I need to grow thicker skin. That's all there is to it because this world is a rough place and you're going to get bumped and bruised. I should have that figured out by now, but I don't.

Another area where I would have to say I don't have the Christian life figured out is worry. I know that I'm supposed to trust God in everything, all the time. But I can worry about things that I have no control over, things I do have some control over, important things and stupid things. Worry is not supposed to be a part of the life of a Christian and sometimes my worry makes me feel like a complete spiritual failure. I worry about the economy, the health of my family, my health, terrorism, chemicals in the water, cancer. I worry that there are spiders in my shoes. I come by my worry honestly. My mother is a world-class worrier and I have the same tendencies. When there's a major project on the horizon, like a new worship service, I start to lose sleep, and want to withdraw, and my old fears of failing just start welling up. And I hate it! The Bible clearly tells us that worry doesn't help anything. We're called to do what we can about situations, but we are to trust that God is in control in ways we cannot see. Living gripped by worry means you will probably miss out on blessings today, you'll miss out on the joy of knowing and trusting in God's goodness.

I've made some progress here, but I would think that at this point in my life, my faith journey, I'd have this figured out, but I don't.

One other confession I have, that you may have picked up on in the video opener, is that there are some Christians I can't stand. I'd think that I'd have this figured out by now so that my love is wider. But I can't stand Christians who are holier-than-thou, judgmental, narrow-minded, who fight and argue over the dumbest things like, "You're reading the wrong version of the Bible. You worship in the wrong style. You don't teach enough from the Old Testament. You don't talk enough about hell. All R-rated movies are of the devil (Even *The Passion of the Christ?*). If you listen to secular music, you're of the devil. Don't get a tattoo. Don't watch the *Teletubbies*. Don't go to Disney World."

It drives me crazy when I hear pastors on TV pumping out this turn-or-burn theology. Like following Jesus is only (and all) about hell-avoidance. You've got to be kidding me! And I really can't stand it when I hear some Christian spouting out that junk about, "If you're faithful God will give you a Rolls-Royce." Yuck!

Enough about that. I'm actually starting a new message series next week about when Christians get it wrong, when we push away a wondering world. And how we can change that. How we can get it right. But I'd think that I would have that figured out by now. And I confess that I don't.

I could confess a few more things, but I think that's enough of that because all confession isn't negative. There is one positive confession that makes it all make sense. Because as much as I might struggle to live out the Christian life, I am a committed follower of Jesus Christ. And my final confession today is simply to tell you why. **To tell you why I am a Christian.** Let me share just a few reasons. First, **I'm a Christian because of the eyewitness accounts of the people who knew Jesus.** The New Testament was written either by people who were direct eyewitnesses or those who had interviewed the eyewitnesses. When I read

what they describe, and how they describe it, I find what they write believable, credible, and compelling. And what they saw guided them in being so passionate about sharing their faith in Jesus that they were willing to risk it all, even face torture and death, because they saw with their own eyes.

I confess that **I'm a Christian because of the Christian life that's offered.** It is the most authentically human way to live. Following Christ motivates us to love our neighbors **and** our enemies. It challenges us to sacrifice something of ourselves for other people—to be concerned about the people that so many other people simply do not care about. It calls us to live a life of love.

Over the last 2,000 years of world history, many of the great social movements of compassion sprang from the followers of Jesus. The civil rights movement in the U.S., the end of apartheid in South Africa, movements to end slavery around the world—all these sprang from the teachings of Jesus. Over the centuries Christians have started thousands of the schools and hospitals in the U.S., as well as missions and social service agencies in our cities and communities. Good works like these have been done by Christians because of the impact Jesus made in their lives. Jesus said, **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35, NIV).**

I confess that **I am Christian because the picture of God that Jesus portrayed is the most compelling picture of God** offered by any of the major religions. When Jesus looked at the multitudes of people and saw them as sheep without a shepherd and had compassion on them, I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus chastised the religious hypocrites but forgave a woman caught in adultery, I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus spent his time with sinners who didn't even know that they were lost, I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus opened the eyes of blind Bartimaeus, who cried out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me" (Mark 10:47), I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus healed a man who wandered among the tombs, filled with demons, completely uncontrollable, I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus met a woman at a well who had been divorced 5 times, and he offered her living water so that she would never be thirsty again, and then he made her an evangelist to the people in her village, I see a compelling picture of God.

On the last night of his life, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet the way a slave would have, I see a compelling picture of God.

When Jesus hung suffering on the cross, laying down his life for others, I see a compelling picture of God.

And when Jesus rose from the grave, triumphing over evil and sin and death, I see a compelling picture of God.

I confess that **I'm a Christian because of God's offer of grace and forgiveness** and because when people receive that grace, they're changed and new life begins. I experienced that for myself. I know what it's like to be lost and then found. I was destructive to myself and others. I didn't care who I hurt, and I hurt a lot of people. I was even suicidal. Until I had an unexpected experience of God that changed me. I realized that he loved me, that my life was broken and he could fix it, and had a plan for my life, and I invited him in and he started to change me from the inside out. The way I looked at the world started to change, so did the way I looked at myself and the shame I carried around for so long.

I confess that **I'm a Christian because of the life God offers after death.** As a pastor I've done over 100 funerals. When I minister to people at times of death, when I face the loss of people that I love, when I think about my own mortality, my faith gives me peace, and hope, and allows me to live with joy.

I confess that **I'm a Christian because I've felt Christ's presence in my life.** The most profound experiences of my life have all related to my faith—the times when I've had the greatest contentment, love, hope, joy. I've experienced things in worship that I can't experience any other way—a peace and joy you can't get through a pill, or through buying a new gadget.

I'm a better husband because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. I'm a better father because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. I'm a better person. The richest parts of my life come from my relationship with God. And that's why I want other people to know the Jesus I know. Listen, my motive for sharing Jesus with others isn't based on instilling the fear of hell in people. My motive is wanting people to experience what I've experienced! I'm motivated thinking about the life that others might be missing out on. Jesus Christ is the life and if you don't know Jesus you're missing out on the best part of life—the joy and peace that you simply can't find anywhere else. That's my ultimate confession.

So if you're here today and you're not a Christian, you can do something about that. Jesus talked about heaven like it was a party, a gigantic wedding banquet, that God invites everybody to. Some reject the invitations. Some just aren't interested in going to the party. Some say they're too busy to respond. We can accept his invitation, or reject it. If we reject it, we miss out on the life that really is life. And listen, God won't ever force you to come, but you've been invited. You can make excuses, you can reject the invitation, the choice is yours. But as your pastor I would say, "Please say yes. Please take hold of this life that is really life, this joy that nothing can defeat, this hope that nothing can overwhelm, the eternal life that no one can take from you. Please say yes." One well-placed yes can change your life forever.

Some of you have been on the fence so long you've worn a groove—in the fence. Isn't it time, that you set it all aside and said yes? Especially after looking at the other faiths, aren't you ready to say, "I'm ready to follow Jesus"?

I've confessed some of my stuff these past few weeks. You've got your own stuff you'd confess. A dirty little secret here, some inadequacies and doubts there. But there's one confession that really brings life.

So I want to end this whole series by leading you in prayer. So let's bow together...

If you're not a Christian yet, let today be your day to say "yes," to get off the fence, to accept God's invitation, not out of some fear of hell, but out of a longing to have life and have it to its fullest like Jesus promised. Accepting his invitation is as simple as three words. Sorry, thank you and please. Maybe you want to say this prayer for yourself. Lord, God, I'm sorry for the things I've done in my life and today, I accept your forgiveness, your invitation to the party. Thank you Jesus for dying on the cross for me to pay a price that I could not pay. And please come and fill me, guide my life, show me what's next, I choose you, just like you have chosen me. In Jesus name. Amen.

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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