

“When Christians Get it Wrong—When Talking of Other Religions and Atheism”

Today we continue in a series of sermons we started last week, "When Christians Get it Wrong." We are trying to learn from people who have opted out of church and Christianity--particularly young adults age 16 to 29. It's not just that they have stopped going to church and they think they might come back sometime. These are young adults who have said, "I am choosing not to be a Christian. I find myself repelled by what I see of Christianity in Christians."

So we are trying to learn from these young adults how we might be better Christians. Now, we're not altering our beliefs. This isn't about polling people who've opted out and changing our beliefs to appeal to them. No, we're trying to hear what their concerns are and say, "Maybe there is something to that, so let's learn from this."

Today we are going to be looking at big questions like: Who is God and what do we believe about God's judgment? How does God look at people who aren't Christians? How wide is God's mercy? How do we treat people who are not Christians? How do we witness to our faith when we interact with people who disagree with us, particularly those who are of other religions and those who would say they have no religion?

With this in mind I want to introduce you to Charlie and Anthony. Listen as they share their experience of Christians and Christianity.

What do you think when your friends become Christians and after that, they don't want to be your friend anymore? Do Christians really hate people of other religions? Aren't they supposed to love others? Anthony said that when some of his friends became Christians they told him that he was going to hell. Have you ever had somebody tell you that you are going to hell? I've had people tell me that I should go to hell, and I have had a few people tell me that I was going to hell. Not pleasant.

Let's dig in to this question about God's mercy and how wide it is. **How wide is God's mercy?** We have to acknowledge that some Christians say that other Christians are going to hell because they live out their faith differently, because their doctrine is different. What they believe about the Trinity, or worship, or baptism, or the role of women in the church. Differences in doctrine and theology can cause Christians to say that other Christians are going to hell. Really?

Don't get me wrong. Doctrine is very important, but when Jesus called people to be his disciples he didn't tell them to first take systematic theology 101 and 102 and then come and follow me. He just said, "Come and follow me."

For me, God's mercy is wide for those for those who have a very different Christian theology than I do. I'm grateful for my Catholic, and Baptist, and Pentecostal, and non-denominational brothers and sisters. Last time I checked they were following Jesus Christ, and trying to love God, and love their neighbors. They may see some things a differently but I am grateful for them. There is a wideness to God's mercy.

Maybe all of that makes sense to you but next you might ask, "What about those people who are not Christians? **What about other religions?** What about those who are Muslim, or Buddhist, or Hindu? This is a really important and big theological question that we have to wrestle with. It's not easy to unpack this question in one message. In 2006 we did an entire message series on religions of the world and I would encourage you to download copies of those if you want to go deeper into this question than what we have time for today.

But, let's take a few minutes and dig into this theological question and let's really put our minds into it. And please don't just take the simplistic answer because it's easy and you learned somewhere along the way and you don't want to wrestle with this stuff. We live in a world where you will come across people who are of different faiths and it's important for us as Christians to think about how we will interact with and relate to them.

This is a big question for many people because here is what they're hearing. Some very vocal Christians are saying that of the 6.7 billion people who live on this planet, 4.5 billion of them are going straight to hell because they are not Christians. Some Christians say that there is another 1.5 billion Catholics and mainline Protestants including Methodists, that are also going to hell. They would say that there is just a tiny little fraction, 500 million people, maybe who got it right. Everyone else is going to hell and part of what people, especially young adults, wrestle with is that we say that God is just and merciful and loving and kind. We say that God created each person and he knit them together in their mothers' wombs. We say that God loves them deeply and yet they didn't get it so they will be eternally tormented in hell?

I hope you can feel the weight of the theological wrestling that is going on in this question. I think it's good that people are asking this question. I think you and I should ask this question.

I'm going to offer you three possible answers to this question of other religions that Christians have held through the years. You might want to write a little bit about each of these down and then I will invite you to chew on them during the rest of the week.

One is a position called **Christian Universalism**. Don't confuse this with Unitarian Universalism. They are two very different things. Christian Universalism is also called Ultimate Reconciliation. This view says that God created all human beings, God loves all human beings, Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, all people, and that in the end God will work out the salvation of every single person so that all will be saved and none will perish. I have to admit that I like the idea of Christian Universalism, but it's just not biblical and it leaves out the free choice that we have to accept or reject God's grace. So I'm not a Christian Universalist.

The diametrically opposite view in the Christian faith is called **Christian Exclusivism**. Christian Exclusivism is a view that says that unless someone received Jesus Christ by name as their personal savior they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, period—even if you never had the chance to hear about Jesus, even if you were living a life of deep love, and mercy, and compassion toward others. If you lived on a remote island and never heard about Jesus; if you were a Native American before the arrival of Christian Missionaries; you were out of luck. The exclusivist belief would say that all those people are going to hell. All Jews, all people of other religions. All people of no religion. All going to hell for eternal torment. At its most extreme, this view says that even children who die before they confess Jesus as Lord, and the mentally incapacitated who cannot profess Jesus, are destined for hell. That can be a hard thing to swallow.

There's a third theological idea that people hold to. It's called **Christian Inclusivism**. This is the view held by most mainline Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and an increasing number of evangelicals. John Wesley, the founder Methodism, held this view. C.S. Lewis held to this view. More recently, it appears that Billy Graham has adopted this view.

Christian Inclusivism says that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by him. God sent Jesus to offer us the gift of salvation and we are saved only by Jesus Christ and what he has done on the cross. But, God can give the gift of salvation that Jesus made possible to anyone he chooses. It's God's gift to give away and he can give it to anyone he chooses to give it to.

This view says that there are many people who have faith in God, and a trust in God, and a desire for God's salvation, even though they don't fully understand the name by which that salvation is given. In that case, what God looks at is the impulse of their hearts. God looks at them based on the knowledge of what they had access to instead of a simple check-the-box kind of answer.

Those who have this view, including myself, draw from scriptures like Ephesians chapter 2. Paul makes a simple presentation of the Gospel there. **“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9, TNIV).**

God in his rich mercy loves us even when we are dead because of our sin and brokenness. It is by grace you have been saved. Grace means God's favor, God's kindness, God's mercy, God's love and God's care but only when that is received by someone who doesn't deserve it. That's what makes it grace! None of us deserve it.

That means that we're not saved by theological information. We're not saved by our Bible knowledge because we took a certain number of Bible classes. It doesn't work that way. All we bring to the table is faith and trust that there is a God who loves us, who has called us and who offers us the gift of salvation for free.

Ideally our faith is in Jesus Christ, especially when we have the opportunity to hear the gospel, and to know it, and to feel it, and to understand it. But many people do not have that opportunity, and so what God looks at is the heart and what we put our trust in.

Listen, as a pastor, I am not in the business of saving souls. That is God's business. God can give the gift of salvation to whomever he chooses. He may give it to the people that you don't like, it's not really for you to decide, and that should be a relief in some way. Do you really want that responsibility? How wide is God's mercy? Probably wider than we can imagine.

Our first year here in Joplin we shared a duplex with a Hindu family. Their names were Ritu and Janak. They had two cute little girls and they were very loving parents. They had a rough start in Joplin. The moving van that had all their worldly belonging in it, including one of their family cars, was in an accident as they moved here and it was almost all totally destroyed. We didn't get to know them real well. We only lived there a year and didn't have much time. But we talked, we had dinner together in their home with friends of theirs. It was fun and unusual and I didn't try to convert them. I didn't tell them they were going to hell. I didn't tell them they needed to repent of their religion and immediately choose Christ.

But here's what I did do. I let my light shine. I talked gently about my faith. I tried to be the best neighbor I could be. I talked to the kids and made sure I didn't run over their tricycles when I was backing out. I took the time to have conversations as often as possible. That's what I did. If we were there longer I would have built that friendship and invited them to church and invited them to get to know you so they could see Christ alive in you. And if they didn't respond to my invitations, I would have still been their friend. Period.

As I got to know them the little bit that I did, I just wanted them to know that there is a wideness to God's grace, and my desire was that they would know that there is more in knowing Jesus Christ. We let the light of Christ shine, and we reserve judgment for God. That's his business, not ours.

In the end I have to say that I don't know the mind of God exactly on this. What I do know is that God is just, and loving and I can count on that. If you're troubled by this idea, I'd just encourage you to have as much humility as possible before your pronounce judgment on other people. And it's also important for us to be able to say that we can trust God to do what is just and we can trust God to do what is loving.

Some of you might hear all this and say, "If this is really the way it is then why do we evangelize? Why send missionaries around the world if this is the way it really works? Why share our faith?" Do you know why we do evangelism? We don't do evangelism because we believe that God is going to stomp everyone into hell who doesn't believe the message that we offer. We do evangelism because we believe that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. We believe that following Jesus is the most authentic life that we can have. We believe that following Jesus brings us richness, and depth, and life, because in knowing him we find eternal life even here and now. We go into all the world to share the good news because Jesus asked us to do it. He asked us to teach people the things that he taught us. This is why we do evangelism.

One more question for all of us to wrestle with. **What is your Christian witness like?** How are you talking about your faith with other people? What are they seeing in your Christian witness that would cause them to say, "That is something real. That's authentic."

I was invited to be a guest speaker at the Joplin Free Thinkers meeting and so a week ago Thursday I was their guest. They are essentially a group of atheists. A friend of mine is a part of that group and a part of our church and he thought it would be good for these two different viewpoints to come together. I have to admit that I was very nervous. When we met there were about 25 Freethinkers there.

Before I met with them I got on their website to learn about them. I read their individual stories about how they became atheists. I read their blogs on lots of different subjects. I read about their preparations for the meeting. One man was clearly very angry and wanted to vent. I'd actually been warned by a member of the Free Thinkers. They said that this man believed that the only good Christian was a dead Christian. That concerned me a little.

That man wrote this in the blog before the meeting. *Cheryl, I just do not want this meeting to be a kiss ass session like it sounds some of our group wants it to be. I can be civil and still stand up for what we stand for. I do not plan on sitting there with my mouth shut just to please a bunch of christians. Randy seems to have this "make friends" attitude because he has never had a bad experience with a christian. I think he has not seen a real christian. My experiences with christians have all been bad, I have lost family and friends and jobs because of christians, I will not be there to cause a problem, but I also will not be there to be preached to...*

That man was there that night. He was very vocal.

As a guest of their group I had the chance to tell them how I got where I am in life. And then I talked about what I thought they assumed about me. I said, "This is what I think you assume about me..." That I've got it all worked out and have pat answers for everything. I don't. I have my doubts... I told them that I figured that they assumed that I think that scientific discovery is a threat to my faith. That I hate homosexuals. That I'm sheltered and a prude. That all I want to do is convert them. That I'm closed minded. I told them that I am none of those things.

I also told them my assumptions about them. That they had been burned by religion in the past. That they were angry. That they worshipped the devil and ate their own children. (I had to throw that in! It took them a second but they laughed). I also told them that I assumed that they are kind, loving, serve the community and care about people and the world.

It was an amazing night. We talked. We conversed. We disagreed about a lot—faith is word they react against. They prefer evidence. They don't see the need for religion; I cannot see life without faith. We agreed on some things, that we must work to do something about: poverty, and teen pregnancy, and AIDS, and illiteracy, and the environment.

We debated about the authenticity of scripture, talked about the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. We talked about other religions. We talked about a lot of things. And for the most part the conversations were civil.

Several of them told how they had lost friends, family, and jobs because they chose to be atheists. How Christian people felt it was necessary to cut all ties with them. That broke my heart. I told them, "That should not be."

I shared with them why I am a Christian. We were there for three and half hours. That sounds like a long time but it went by so fast. One of them asked at the end where do we meet. Where do our viewpoints intersect. I said, "We meet at Hearts and Hammers. We meet on Saturday morning patching holes in people's roofs, building handicapped ramps, winterizing the homes of the poor. That's where we meet."

On Tuesday this was printed in The Joplin Globe, you might have seen it. It was sent in by the same man who wrote about how all of his experiences with Christians were bad. He writes: *On Thursday, Oct. 1, a group of atheists — the Joplin Freethinkers — and a group of Christians got together to discuss our differences. The meeting was held at the Salvage Yard in Joplin. I speak only for myself and I would like to thank the Rev. Aaron Brown of the Salvage Yard for having this meeting with us.*

Many topics were discussed, and there were disagreements, and there were some agreements. No angry words were spoken on either side, and it was a very civil discussion. It was, in fact, a very good discussion between people of different viewpoints. I appreciated the honest answers, even if I disagreed with most of them. It was nice to actually discuss our differences, as people should do when they disagree.

I would like to acknowledge that Brown and the group of Christians present were very tolerant of our group, which we as atheists do not always see. This changed my mind somewhat of how I thought of Christians, because of my past experiences.

I see that there are Christians who want to be tolerant and talk about our differences, as we atheists wish to do. It showed me that there is common ground between both groups and we can peacefully and respectfully live together in this world. We will disagree for the most part, but it does give all of us hope that one day we can come together.

I want to personally thank a young woman, who hugged me and said she was sorry for the way I had been treated in the past. That made me feel good, that she took her time to do this. I appreciated the act and thanked her for showing me the kindness that she did. Andrew Maddock, Webb City

That was written from a man who was characterized as saying that the only good Christian is a dead Christian. Something happened that night.

Scripture puts it this way, **"Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude...Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing... And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way..." (1 Peter 3:8-9, 15-16, NLT.)**

This is the kind of Christian witness that I'm talking about—the one who follows in the footsteps of Jesus—the one who does the things that Peter said—the one who lives their life and speaks the gospel with humility, not one who insists on telling people something they don't really know about their eternal fate, but instead offering them a picture of what the gospel really looks like.

This is my hope for Saint Paul's. I hope that we are the kind of Christians that when people think of us they say, "I know people from that church. They are the real deal. I remember a time when I was really down and one of their members just loved me. I know that they have members who serve in every single agency in Joplin to help make this community a better place. I know that those people live sacrificially and give of selflessly. If I was going to church anywhere, it would be with people like that."

That is my hope and prayer for us as we strive to be Jesus Christ to the world. When we do that we move from being the kind of arrogant Christians that make nonreligious people crazy, and we begin to exemplify a model of humility that draws people to Jesus Christ. That is my hope for us. And for today that is the Good News along the way.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.