

DON'T BE A "CHRISTIAN"
Become A Follower of Jesus
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Matthew 21:23-32 (The Message)

Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?"

Jesus responded, "First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I'll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?"

They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, "If we say 'heaven,' he'll ask us why we didn't believe him; if we say 'humans,' we're up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet." They decided to concede that round to Jesus. "We don't know," they answered.

Jesus said, "Then neither will I answer your question.

"Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, 'Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.'

"The son answered, 'I don't want to.' Later on he thought better of it and went.

"The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never went.

"Which of the two sons did what the father asked?"

They said, "The first."

Jesus said, "Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God's kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe him.

We began this series — DON'T BE A "CHRISTIAN" by looking at how people outside the "church" look at the church and Christians — and suggesting that we need to find another way.

We need to redefine what "church" is . . .

Because for most people who are outside the church they see the church as:

- Judgmental
- Self-serving
- Holier than thou
- legalistic
- rigid

We need to recognize that one of the primary tasks of the church is to create community — an open community to anyone who wants to belong

We need to redefine what a "Christian" is . . .

Jeff reminded us that a Christian is someone who is a theologian — someone engaged in wrestling with God and willing to share their journey with others.

Last week I reminded you that the Christian community must be a circle that looks both inward and outward. That is what it means to be in mission — both to each other and to others.

But the question is HOW DO WE DO IT?

If you asked most "Christians" the answer is pretty simple — believe the right things about Jesus and everything will turn out just fine.

That is certainly the message in the new movie : FACING THE GIANTS. A Christian youth pastor wrote this review about the movie

Give Jesus your life and everything will change - you'll tackle better, make amazing catches, stop fumbling, start making touchdown passes, and even make the playoffs. All because Jesus magically turns horrible undersized weaklings into All-American athletes. I laughed out loud when a coach quoted scripture to explain to the kicker why he was missing field goals. But wait, that's not all. You'll get a brand new truck, a \$6000 raise, and you and your wife's struggle with infertility will suddenly end in pregnancy - twice. THEN you'll win the state championship because God helps a weakling kick the winning field goal 12 yards further than he's ever kicked before - and into the wind, no less - all because "God wanted him to make it." Then you'll win the state championship again the next year. None of this good stuff would have

happened if the team hadn't chosen to follow Jesus with all their hearts.

It would be nice if it was that easy.
But that is not the message that the Bible offers to us.

Did you find the passage that was read this morning confusing?

Let me try to set it up for you and offer a possible understanding of how this helps us to understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

This story in Matthew is found shortly after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on what we call "Palm Sunday".

The passage that we read really is 2 stories that are somewhat related.

First, Jesus is questioned by the chief priests and scribes. They want to know by what authority Jesus is preaching.

Jesus answers in what I believe is his favorite method — by asking another question.

The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?"

Jesus responded, "First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I'll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?"

I love it!

The second story could almost be called: "When is a Christian not a Christian?"

Jesus makes clear who is obedient and who is not; who follows and who only pretends to.

In the end, it's not what the sons say that matters. It's what they do.

Ultimately it is their behavior that counts!

"Just tell 'em what they want to hear, then do what you want" is the credo of too many today.

This sweet-tongued son looks, at first, like a clean-cut kid.

He's slick.
 He's quick.
 He talks a good game.

But at the heart of it he is not to be trusted!
 He lies to his dad, as if his dad isn't ever going to discover just what type of person he is. As if his dad isn't going to see through his charade.

The Christian faith is a showy faith.

Even though we often talk about our faith as being personal. The truth of the matter is — it is neither personal nor private.

That is because Christianity is a DOING religion.
 Christian is a verb — not a noun

What we do matters!

James 2:14-25 (The Message)

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, "Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I'll handle the works department."

Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.

Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?

Wasn't our ancestor Abraham "made right with God by works" when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the Scripture sentence, "Abraham believed God and was set right with God,"

includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?

The same with Rahab, the Jericho harlot. Wasn't her action in hiding God's spies and helping them escape—that seamless unity of believing and doing—what counted with God? The very moment you separate body and spirit, you end up with a corpse. Separate faith and works and you get the same thing: a corpse.

What we do, how we behave, matters.

Christians who say a lot but don't DO may fool themselves into thinking they have fooled the world, but they can't fool God. We're all transparent before God. We hide nothing - not actions, not intentions.

The truthful son, who speaks his mind plainly, he doesn't tell his dad what his dad wants to hear.

Dad asks for help. He answers honestly, "No, sir. Not me."

Maybe that boy speaks rashly. Maybe he isn't as smooth, as slick or as refined as his brother ... but, eventually, he does what's required of him. He doesn't sneak off. He rolls the idea around in his head, makes up his mind and without another word, rushes off to do the obedient thing.

An awful lot of people put too much stock in what appears, rather than what is. Certain individuals may want to appear to be good Christians. They want to go to the right church, to be seen with the right people and to give to the right charities. They may wear the right clothes. They may read the right books, speak the right words, look the right part, but maybe they're like the son who lies to his father, expecting never to get caught. But the truth becomes plain to see.

Jesus points to the prostitutes and tax collectors, whose appearance isn't religious but whose hearts are.

These people aren't synagogue people. They are scorned people. Outcasts. They're barely tolerated, and often despised.

Jesus says the prostitutes and tax men are going to get into heaven before the holier-than-thou Pharisees.

Before them. Why?

Because even though they know squat about the law and care little about rules, but they know enough to recognize the truth when they hear it. Once they hear it, their hearts change. Once their hearts change, they live their faith.

Terry Mattingly, writing in his nationally syndicated religion column tells the story of Archbishop George Carey when he was serving communion as a parish priest. A college student knelt at the altar rail, another parishioner pointed accusingly and loudly said: "Don't give him communion. He does not believe. He is mocking us all."

Stunned, Father George Carey asked the student for his response. He looked up and said: "I am confirmed. I am here because I want to follow." The priest served him communion.

Our task is simply to do, what God asks us to do. And leave the rest to God.