

What is a Christian? (Part 4)
A Sermon for February 19, 2017
Matthew 5:38-48
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

What is a Christian? Today we are completing our 4 week series trying to answer this question. Of course, on the one hand, the answer has always been obvious. A Christian is someone who follows Christ. But what does that actually mean?

It's worth remembering that part of the reason that we come here every week is that we're all trying to work that answer in our lives. We're trying to work out what it means to be a Christian-- not in some laboratory-standardized life, but in our own lives, with all of the complexities they bring. We want to know what it means to be a Christian the other six days of the week. What does it mean to be a Christian teacher, or government worker, or truck driver, or mechanic, or scientist, or health care professional, or parent, or retiree.

It's not easy to be a Christian. Those who think being a Christian is easy probably have no idea what it is to be a Christian. And yet one of the many paradoxes of faith in Christ is what Jesus says in chapter 11: "Come to *me*, all you that are weary... and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; ... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The paradox is that when we pick up Jesus's teaching and work it out in our lives, we find that the burden isn't ours to bear alone. Jesus bears the real weight of the load. Jesus's burden becomes light.

I hope you'll indulge me for a second-- I just want to share a little bit with you about my journey so far at working out what it means to be a Christian. I'm hoping that it'll help frame what Jesus says.

I was blessed to be raised in a Christian home and to gain a solid foundation with the teaching of the Methodist church. But the reality is that I've been a slow learner when it comes to following Jesus.

Thankfully there have been many patient people in my life to mentor me in the faith. Chief among them is a retired United Methodist pastor, who I've met with more or less every week for the last 8 years. There is also a pastor from the Dominican Republic whose faith and love made it clear to me a long time ago that she had something that I did not have. And more recently-- really in the past couple of years-- there has been the founder of the Methodist movement himself, John Wesley.

Yes, I know that he's been dead for more than two centuries. But his written words continue to be powerful for me. One sermon that was particularly important for me is one called "The Almost Christian." Before describing what it is for someone to be "altogether" a Christian, he describes someone that is "almost" a Christian. The description is amazing. It's almost hard to summarize because it just keeps going on and on with virtues, but here's a snippet. It's steeped in scriptural language, including the sermon on the mount itself.

"A second thing implied in the being almost a Christian, is, the having a *form* of godliness; of that godliness which is prescribed in the gospel of Christ; the having the outside of a real Christian. Accordingly, the almost Christian does nothing which the gospel forbids. He [does not take] the name of God in vain; he [blesses],

and [does not curse]; he [does not swear] at all, but his communication is, [yes, yes; no, no]; ... he not only avoids all *actual* adultery, fornication, and uncleanness, but [also] every word or look that either directly or indirectly tends thereto; ... And, if he suffer wrong, he [does] not [avenge] himself, [nor return] evil for evil... he is no brawler, no scoffer, either at the faults or infirmities of his neighbour. [H]e does not willingly wrong, hurt, or grieve any man; but in all things act and speaks by that plain rule, “[Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.].”... He [does] “good,” all manner of good, “to all men;” and to their souls as well as their bodies. he reproves the wicked, instructs the ignorant, confirms the wavering, quickens the good, and comforts the afflicted...”¹

And it just goes on and on from there. He concludes his description of the *almost* Christian by describing that this person is not just outwardly a Christian, but the *almost* Christian has the heart-felt sincerity of this person. Please continue to excuse the old style language. He says,

“Sincerity, therefore, is necessarily implied in the being *almost* a Christian; a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will. It is necessarily implied, that a man have a sincere view of pleasing God in all things; in all his conversation; in all his actions; in all he does or leaves undone. This design, if any man be *almost* a Christian, runs through the whole tenor of his life.”

This person, Wesley says, is only *almost* a Christian. He then asks a rhetorical question: is it possible for a person to come this far and be

¹ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

only *almost* a Christian? He answers yes, based not only on the testimony of scripture, but also on his own experience. For a long time, he himself had been *almost* a Christian.

What more is there, then, to being not only *almost* a Christian, but *altogether* a Christian? Wesley says that it is love of God, the love of neighbor, and faith working through love. It is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. In the words of Romans 5, it is to have the love of God *poured* into your heart by the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, love is not something we can conjure up in ourselves. In that sense, the love of God is no different. But in another sense, this is a love that does not come about naturally. It doesn't "emerge" in the same way. It is a gift of God by the grace of Christ alone.

But the love of God turns quickly to love of neighbor. Wesley goes on, saying, "If any [one] ask, "Who is my neighbour?" we reply, Every [one] in the world; Nor may we in any [way omit] our enemies or the enemies of God and their own souls. But every Christian [loves] these also as himself [even] "as Christ loved us."

Why am I sharing all this with you? It because of these words of Jesus that I think sum up our whole reading for today: "love your enemies." This is not a fringe teaching of Jesus, even if there were such a thing. It is a window into the love of God and love of neighbor that Jesus says sums up all of God's commandments.

"Love your enemies." It's easy to *talk* about. It's especially easy for me to talk about, as I have to confess that I can't actually think of anyone in

my life who has ever been my enemy in any objective way. Probably the closest I've come is to feel solidarity with the victims of 9/11, or even that awful Charleston shooting last year.

I'm guessing that many of you can't say the same. You can picture your enemies quite easily. These are the people that have harmed you or would harm you given the chance. They've *sinned* against you. In no way do they desire good in your life, but they hope for your downfall. They want to laugh at your pain.

Into that situation, Jesus speaks his most scandalous words: love your enemies. And why does Jesus tell us to do this? He says, "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Paul tells us that while we were still God's enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son. The words, "Love your enemies," aren't empty words for Jesus. This is what he teaches because he is a child of his heavenly Father. Jesus *loves* his enemies. He prays for us to be forgiven even as we crucify him.

This isn't an ideal that Jesus knows we'll never live up to. This incredible love-- this is the heart and soul of what it is to be a Christian. We love with God's own love. If someone strikes us, we don't resist, we turn the other cheek. If someone wants to take you to court over your shirt, given them your coat too. If someone forces you to do labor, go beyond what they require. *Love* your enemies.

We're under the constant temptation to sugarcoat what Jesus says, because it seems like such a bitter pill to swallow. Jesus knew that this

would be the case. He knew all of the ways that readers and preachers would be tempted to twist his words into knots to help us feel better. And so he gave us some checks and balances, as it were. He says at the end of Matthew some words that are called “the Great Commission.” “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*”

We don’t teach one another to ignore Jesus’ commands. We don’t teach one another how to get around Jesus’ commands. We simply teach others to obey his commands.

Paul, the great preacher of justification by faith, understood this. Paul essentially begins and ends his letter to the Romans by speaking about his work to bring about “the obedience of faith.” We are not saved by our works. But saving faith always brings obedience.

So, let’s get down to the real world. Is it actually possible to love your enemies? No. Shall I just sit down?

This is impossible for us, but with God-- all things are possible.

Perhaps you’ve heard of Corrie ten Boom. She was the daughter of a watchmaker, and a watchmaker herself, whose early life was very uneventful. Yet as World War II began, she and her family became leaders in the Dutch underground. They built a special room in their house where they could hide Jews and help them escape the Nazis. Because of this, Corrie, her father, and her sister were sent to

concentration camps. Her father died shortly after arriving. Her sister died within the year.

Corrie was eventually released. She began to travel, speaking at various places in order to tell her story and to help Europe heal. One day, she was speaking at a church in Munich about the forgiveness that Jesus offers. She was approached afterwards by a man that she recognized, but who did not know her. He was one of the guards from Ravensbruck, where her sister. He had been the one who would stand at the shower door as the women walked past wearing nothing.

So in this church in Munich, he walked up to her to affirm her and thank her for her message. He put his hand out to shake hers. How did she respond? She writes powerfully about it in her wonderful book, *The Hiding Place*:

I who had preached so often to the people... [of] the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. *Lord Jesus*, I prayed, *forgive me and help me to forgive him....*

I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. Again I breathed a silent prayer. *Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give your forgiveness.*

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, he gives along with the command, the love itself.

At first she couldn't make herself extend her hand. Then she prays. She finds herself able to extend her hand, not in love, but in obedience. God has helped her to be obedient to Jesus' command. And *then* she feels it-- she not only feels that she forgives the man but that she actually loves him. The command of Jesus becomes a covered promise.

Jesus doesn't tell us to wait around for the Holy Spirit to compel us to love our enemies. No. He just says "love your enemies."

We know we can't do it. But when we take the step out onto the water in faith, we often find ourselves walking on it. Before we obey Jesus, his commands are hollow. They're idealistic. They're something we could never attain. But as we pray, the Holy Spirit helps us to be obedient to Jesus' commands. And then when we actually do what Jesus teaches us-- when we take that step of faith... to give, to forgive, to be merciful, to make peace, to not retaliate-- we experience the reality of the good news. God pours his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Loving God and our neighbor fully. This is what it is to be holy, as God is holy. This is what it is to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.