

## **“I Believe in God, But Not Christians”**

**October 8, 2023**

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Good morning, good morning, good morning. If every morning was like this morning, every morning would be a good morning, just like this morning is a good morning. Amen? Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture for you from the book of John, chapter 13, beginning with verse 34. Jesus, speaking hours before He was crucified, said, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” May God bless the reading of the Word.

There are a lot of stories circulating about the relationship of the great Indian reformer, Gandhi, and the Christian faith. I was taught, at one point, that Gandhi came to the United States to study Christianity. It turns out that is wrong. He did not. He began his journey with the Bible in South Africa. He was given the Bible and he said, “Well, I’ll read it,” and he started with the Old Testament, and he got bogged down. Not long after that he moved to England, and somebody gave him a New Testament. And as he read the New Testament, he became enthralled with the story of Jesus Christ and His teachings. And from that time on, he quoted Jesus often. And it is well documented that he fashioned his nonviolent protests on the teachings of Jesus Christ. A missionary by the name of E. Stanley Jones from Britain had many conversations with Gandhi, but in a formal interview with Gandhi asked him why he refused to become a follower of Christ. And this is his response. He said, “Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It’s just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ.” Ouch! Later on in his life, he was asked what advice he would give Christians. He said, “I would tell Christians to take Jesus more seriously and follow Him more closely.” Did you hear that? He said, “I would tell Christians to take Jesus more seriously and follow Him more closely.”

Sadly, this is not an isolated interview or an isolated incident. Today we continue our series of sermons on: “I love God, but...” Today is: “I love God but not Christians.” Right after smartphones became a thing, I was at a pastors’ conference and the speaker asked us to do something that most of the time we tell people to do the opposite of. He said, “Now, I want you to take your smartphones out and turn them on.” (I pray that you turn yours off, and people are pulling theirs out to check!) “So, I want you to pull them out and I want you to google this open-ended question: ‘Why are Christians so...’ and just leave it at that.” And we did. And I remember when it came up, I wasn’t totally shocked, but I certainly was disappointed. There were very few positive responses. Most of them were very negative. So, I did that in preparation for this morning’s message, hoping they had changed. This is what I got. “Why are Christians so mean, bitter, judgmental, angry, dogmatic, rude, stingy, unkind and hateful?” That same audience was asked, “What does Jesus stand for?” And they almost unanimously said, “Jesus stood for love.” You see, even the unchristian world knows that Jesus Christ stands for love.” And so, when Christians are unloving, even non-Christians know we are not following Jesus. Now, we can argue with Google all we want, but I’ll remind you as I reminded you last week, a person’s perception is their reality, whether it is true or not. And that is how we are viewed. We have an image problem. And the way you solve an image problem is not by arguing about it; it is by living it down. Gandhi said that we should take Jesus more seriously and follow Him more closely. Does that sound about right?

When Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?", He said, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your mind, with all of your soul, and with all of your strength. And the second is like it or equal to it. That is: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang all the Law and the Prophets." Not some of the Law and the Prophets, but all of the Law and the Prophets are summed up in loving God and loving our neighbor. When pressed about who our neighbor is, in the story of the Good Samaritan, He said very clearly that our neighbor is anyone and everyone in need. That's who our neighbor is. And this love we are to show is not a sentiment. It is not a feeling; it is an action. And that love is even to be extended to our enemies. In the passage I read just a few moments ago, a verse that is called "Our Commandment," Jesus said, "By this all people will know you are my disciples, by the way you love one another." So, when Christians are unloving, even the non-Christian world knows we are not following Jesus. All right, drive a peg down there. Hold on. We'll be back in a few moments.

The anger of Jesus is something that, for some of us, makes us a little uncomfortable, because when we think of Jesus, we think of love. But the two are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes when you love, you do get angry, because others are treated unfairly and hurt. The anger of Jesus sometimes makes us a little uncomfortable because Jesus attracted, quote, unquote, "sinners like a moth to a flame." Tax collectors, prostitutes, the unclean, the marginalized, were attracted to him in droves. Jesus' anger was reserved for religious folks, mostly for religious leaders who are judgmental, hypocritical, and unloving; people who were more interested in rules than in people; people who would sacrifice people for their rules; people who forgot that God's primary rule for us is to love. Jesus had an ongoing conflict with a group called the Pharisees. "Pharisees" means "Separate Ones." Make no mistake: the Pharisees were very, very, very religious. The fact of the matter is, the reason they were called the Separate Ones, the Pharisees, is they separated themselves from common life for the very purpose of following the rules, following the minutia of the rules. And Jesus often ran afoul of the Pharisees because He refused to put rules in front of people. And He often broke their rules by loving people. You see, they were very religious, but they missed the point. They were aggravated and mad at Jesus because He broke their rules, and they missed the point that thousands of people were turning to God because of Jesus Christ. They couldn't see that, because He was breaking some of their rules. Jesus called them hypocrites. The word "hypocrite" is the same word from which we get the word "actor." They were pretenders, is what Jesus called them.

There are four major areas of hypocrisy Jesus warned against. The first one is wrong motives. This is doing the right thing for the wrong reason. He used examples of praying, of giving, and of fasting. All of those are great activities. But the Pharisees would stand on the street corners, lift their hands to God and pray as loud as they possibly could, for the purpose of being seen and being heard, so that people would say, "Oh, look how religious they are." And Jesus said, "Hogwash!" They would fast on feast days. That's when everybody is in town. And to symbolize they were fasting, they would mess up their hair and they would mess up their beards. And they would put smut on their faces so people would say, "Hey, look, they're fasting." And when they would give alms, when they would give to the poor, quite literally they would take a trumpet and blow it and announce to everybody, "Look at what I'm giving!" Right thing, wrong motive.

Jesus also warned against judging. We spent a good bit of time on that last Sunday, if you were here. Jesus used some of His carpenter humor in the picture of somebody trying to remove a speck of sawdust from another person's eye, all the while having a log hanging out of theirs. Jesus said that's ludicrous. And our judging others is also ludicrous. We do not have the right; we do not have the ability; and we do not have the whole story. These are people who see others' sins and are oblivious to their own. It boils down to spiritual pride. I have heard this said on many occasions: "I may not be perfect, but I'm better than them." That's spiritual pride. Jesus warned also about majoring on minors, keeping the rules and missing the point, fighting over the details and forgetting that our purpose is to love. Love drives people to God instead of away from God. We fight over details and forget that our defining characteristic as a Christian is to love. If we do not love, we cannot call ourselves Christian. Our purpose is to love people as they are, where they are, and lead them to Christ. Don't get distracted! Last but not least, Jesus warned about being two-faced. Jesus called the Pharisees white-washed tombs. They were bright and shiny on the outside, but inside they were full of corruption and dead men's bones. For them, it was all about appearances.

If I'm honest, I have to admit from time to time I struggle with all of these. How about you? But I think if we admit that, if we own that, if we recognize that, we can combat that and we can keep from being hypocrites. We can do it. We can follow Christ more closely and take Christ more seriously. Jesus commanded us not to judge but to love: to love God, to love ourselves, to love our neighbors, and to love even our enemies. When we get it right, when we follow Christ more closely and take Him more seriously, then people see Jesus Christ in us and want what we have. When we get it right, we love. We give. We work for justice and equality. We embrace those outside the faith.

As I was preparing this sermon, I've had an ongoing joke with myself that I have enjoyed. You might not. But I have said one thing here that has caused more consternation than anything else I've said, so of course I've decided to say it again. And I said it early on in my time here, so I think maybe those of you who have been around for a while, now that you know me a little bit better, will be able to understand what I'm saying. You ready for it? Here it is. Churches that love each other don't grow; it's churches that love others that grow. There's nothing wrong with loving each other. We should love each other. But I can take you to dozens of churches that you could not break into that church with dynamite, but they love each other. They love each other; they just don't love anybody else. Churches that have a passion for the lost, churches that have a passion for their community, churches who love people outside the faith, those are the churches that grow. When we act like Jesus, we draw people to God rather than repel them. Here's a quote for you: "A saint is a person through whom Jesus lives again." I'm going to challenge you to be that person. Be that person, through whom Jesus lives again, by taking Jesus more seriously and following Him more closely. Let's pray.

Hear our prayers, O Lord. Show us where we, too, have been hypocrites. Show us where we have professed faith in Christ and denied that faith with our lives. Lord, may we live such lives that others would see Jesus in us and want what You have given us. In Christ's name, amen.