

Sound Living

What it
Means to be
a Christian

Close Only Counts
in Horseshoes and
Hand Grenades

Matthew 18:18-30

Jerry Nelson

If others knew us as we know ourselves would they wonder how we can call ourselves Christians? What do we see and hear when we look at ourselves in our homes, our work places, our recreation and entertainment, our language, our priorities and in our use of money and time? Come study what the Bible says about truly being a Christ-follower—a Christian.

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Close Only Counts in Horseshoes and Hand Grenades

What it Means to Be Christian

Luke 18:18-30

"A certain ruler asked (Jesus), 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone. You know the commandments: "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother." 'All these I have kept since I was a boy,' he said.

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'

Those who heard this asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus replied, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God.'

Peter said to him, 'We have left all we had to follow you!' 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus said to them, 'no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.' "

(Luke 18:18-30)

The “certain ruler,” in the Luke text who questioned Jesus, wanted to believe he was okay with God or at least that he was close. But Jesus shows him that “close” isn’t truly close at all. Somehow the teachings of Jesus had made the man nervous about his eternal destiny and so he came and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life.

There are many people in our society who are quite **unconcerned** about God. They don’t even think about God very often, if at all. And they certainly don’t concern themselves about what God, or any god, might think. But I contend that most who attend church with any frequency have at least an intermittent interest in what their relationship with God is. And I know that many have a great deal of interest. But even the least interested have fleeting moments of nervousness about their eternal destiny – “What must **I** do to inherit eternal life?”

What *is* a Christian? Miriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines a Christian as “one who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ.” If we were to ask others, here and around the world, I think we might hear some of the following definitions:

- From the viewpoint of many Muslims: A Christian is an American.
- From the viewpoint of an atheist: A Christian is one who believes that Jesus is God.
- From the viewpoint of an untaught churchgoer: A Christian is one who believes in God and goes to church.

I heard that from the mouth of a man just recently.

- From the viewpoint of many evangelical Christians a Christian is one who believes in Jesus and has invited Jesus into his/her heart to forgive their sins and give them eternal life.”

In other words, for some, a Christian is one who has

prayed the prescribed prayer, or one who has gone forward in some evangelistic meeting, or one who has been baptized and/or confirmed. I'm not going to take the time here to talk about **how one becomes** a Christian; please see the Appendix for more information on that. Instead I wish to see what the Bible says a Christian **is**.

Before continuing with that, let me tell you what led me to write on this subject. Many years ago our church laid out an agenda for the church. We talked about evangelism, world missions, Christian marriages and families, true worship, persevering prayer, spiritual community, and compassion. Looking back on this agenda, it occurs to me is that it is almost pointless if the hearers are not truly Christians.

- Asking people who are not Christians to engage in God's kingdom work is like pushing a rope uphill.
- People aren't going to join together to storm the gates of heaven with prayer if they aren't Christians.
- People aren't going to give their lives, including their time and money, for the work of the kingdom if they don't love the King more than themselves.

It occurs to me that before we can call people to engage in the **work** of the kingdom we must know that they are **citizens** of the kingdom.

Before we call them to **serve** the king, we must know they are **subjects** of the king. It seems that before expecting everyone to embrace the agenda of "kingdom" prayer, missions, and compassion, it is important to give everyone an opportunity to deal frankly with who their "king" is.

The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 13:5 *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves..."*

Something has gone wrong with the popular definition of "Christian" and something has gone wrong even with the

proclamation of the gospel. Millions in our country and maybe even scores in our church can call themselves Christians even when it has little bearing on their lives beyond attendance in church and dollars given to charity. Recently someone gave a video to me on the evangelical faith of President George Bush. It contained glowing testimonials about the President's conversion and relationship with Jesus. Newsweek magazine did an in-depth report last year on both major candidates in the Presidential race. In it they quote both candidates, including the self-proclaimed "evangelical" President, using very vulgar language.

Now I don't know the President and you probably don't either, and I don't even know if the Newsweek reports were true, but we know ourselves; what do we see and hear when we look at ourselves in our homes, in our work places, in our recreation and entertainment, in our language, in our priorities, in our use of money and time, and the rest of life? If others knew us as we know ourselves would they wonder how we can call ourselves Christians? So back to the question, "How **does** the **Bible** describe a Christian?" Again remember we are not talking about **how** one becomes a Christian but **what a Christian is**.

Look at what the Bible says:

Luke 14:26-27 – *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters— yes, even his own life—he **cannot be my disciple**. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me **cannot be my disciple**."*

Exodus 20:3 – *"You shall have **no** other gods before me."*

Revelation 3:15-16 – *"I know your deeds, that **you are neither cold nor hot**. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."*

Matthew 7:18-20 – *"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, **by their fruit you will recognize them**."*

Luke 6:46 – *"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"*

Luke 9:23-26 – *"Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, **he must deny himself** and take up his cross daily **and follow me**. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? **If anyone is ashamed of me and my words**, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.' "*

Luke 16:13 – *"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. **You cannot serve both God and Money**."*

John 12:26 – *"Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be."*

1 John 2:3-6 – *"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. **This is how we know we***

are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

1 John 2:9-10 – "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light..."

1 John 2:15-17 - "Do not love the world or anything in the world. **If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.** For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

1 John 3:10,14-15 – "**This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother...** We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him."

Matthew 7:21-23 – "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only he who does the will of my Father** who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' (didn't we attend church regularly, teach Sunday School, give to the poor and serve on church committees) *Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*" (All bold emphasis added)

If you think I have gone on too long with illustrations, I assure you I could go on much longer. Over and over again in the Bible a Christian is defined as a follower of Jesus Christ, a disciple of Jesus, and a lover of God and one another. When Jesus approached the fishermen, Peter, James and John at the Sea of Galilee, and told them to follow Him it says that they immediately left everything and followed Jesus. Matthew 4:19-20 says, "*Come, follow me, Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.'* At once they left their nets and followed him."

If they had not followed Jesus would they have rightly been called Christ-followers, Christians?

Like the ruler who came to Jesus, in the account we read earlier, some of us have turned Christianity into dogma and duty. That ruler said **he knew** the commandments **and he kept** them—isn't that close enough? But in Luke 18:22 it says, "*When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'*"

When Jesus responded this way:

- He wasn't saying the man was close and that he'd make it if he just tried a little harder.
- He wasn't saying the man was almost there if he would not only not do the wrong things but would also do the good things.
- He wasn't saying that he'd make it if he gave more money.

Jesus was looking right into the man's soul and seeing that his religion was external only—he **did** the right things, usually, **but he did so from a very wrong source and motive**. His habits were changed, somewhat, but his heart wasn't.

260 years ago the famous evangelist George Whitefield preached a sermon entitled "The Almost Christian." I'm indebted to him for some insight into this issue of nominal Christianity—Christian in name but not in true nature. Whitefield said "The Almost Christian" lives between two opinions—he tries to live between Christ and the world with allegiance to both.

- He tries to serve God and money.
But Jesus said "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Luke 16:13)
- He gives some attention to religion but he's cautious that he doesn't go too far. He's figured out that it's acceptable to talk about "the man upstairs," or "the good Lord," or even "God" but it's hard for him to let the word "Jesus" slip from his lips—that's too religious.
- In church he recites, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," but he's very selective about what he obeys.
- He lives hoping God will be tolerant of his partial obedience.
- He depends a lot on outward indications of religion—he attends church regularly, he partakes of communion, he reads his Bible, and he even prays. But he knows nothing of an experiential relationship with Jesus.
- He is "just" in his dealings with people and fair with his neighbor but he doesn't do this because of love for God but because he doesn't want to hurt his reputation and advantage in the world.

- He tries hard to avoid doing the things he thinks of as wrong, contenting himself with not remembering having hurt anyone. But he forgets that Jesus cursed the fig tree not for bearing bad fruit but for bearing no fruit!
- He is open to giving to charity as long as it is not too frequently or too much, but rarely thinks of actually engaging the sick, the imprisoned, the hungry himself—that's for others to do.
- He is temperate in his use of drink and food not because of a love for Jesus but because he loves himself, afraid that intemperance will make him less effective in business or may hurt his body. It's true, he's no drunkard, but he knows very little of self-denial.

Again in a phrase, his religion is only external not internal. It is of the head not the heart. Oh, his actions are somewhat modified but his heart is unchanged. And any conformity to God's will is from fear of divine reprisal rather than out of love for Jesus.

The ruler that questioned Jesus was of that type. And so Jesus put him to a test that would get right at the core of the man's religiosity and the motive of his religion.

"(Jesus) said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'
"(Luke 18:22 – Emphasis Added)

Jesus knew that the man's money was more important to him than God and his own soul.

- To another person, maybe to you, Jesus might say, "Give up your dream of financial independence and

come follow me.”

- Or “Stop your pursuit of that career position you covet and come follow me.”
- Or stop letting your pride (your fear of others’ thoughts of you) keep you from fully embracing Jesus and his kingdom. “Come follow me.”

According to Jesus, at the root of this man’s problem was a desire to live between two worlds—to serve God, “almost,” and himself. He was religious but no disciple.

But a Christian is not just “almost” or “close.” Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Luke 9:23-25) Again I remind you I am not describing **how** one becomes a Christian, I am describing **what** the Bible says a Christian is. A Christian is a **Christ**-follower!

If you look at your own life and discern, like that questioning ruler did, that you stand between two worlds, trying to have both and depending on both, you are not a Christian.

If you look at your own motivations and find that it is love for yourself rather than a growing love for God that prompts your actions then you are not a Christian.

If you think about your life choices and you realize that you have been mostly following another god, another love, rather than following Jesus, then you are not a Christian.

If you realize that you don’t have a relationship with Jesus,

you just wanted the “fire insurance,” then you aren’t a Christian.

Some of you have been sold a bill of goods.

- You heard that if you refrain from certain conduct you’d be a Christian.
- Others of you heard that if you do enough good things you’d be a Christian.
- Still others of you heard that if you prayed the right prayer you’d be a Christian.

But a Christian is a *Christ-follower*—are you?

If we are following Jesus, it will be evident. I look to the Scripture to see what God’s people look like and it is very different than what the people of the world look like. God’s people are different not to be different but because they are following and emulating a very different leader than the rest of the world.

- They don’t find sin amusing because they know the wages of sin is death.
- They don’t bathe their minds in the typical fare on television and in motion pictures because they have been taught to think about whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, pure, lovely, and admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about those things. (Philippians 4)

It is not my desire to make true Christ-followers doubt their relationship with Jesus. And if your sensitive conscience makes you so doubt, I will trust God’s Spirit to witness to your spirit that you are a child of God. But I do want those of you:

- who have tried to have it both ways,
- who have tried to live between both worlds,

- who have tried to have a measure of religion but have never embraced Jesus as Lord, to realize how futile that is.

I do want those of you who are not Jesus-followers, in spite of what you may have previously thought, to realize you are not a Christian by any New Testament definition of the word.

- I desire for the Spirit of God to make you fear for your soul and to flee to Jesus alone for true salvation from sin and death.
- I do long for the Spirit to give you a love for Jesus that you will want nothing other than to know and follow Him—to know life.

Jesus didn't come to make us feel good about ourselves; He came to save the lost.

I am intentionally not finishing this sermon. I want you to wrestle with your own Spirit-convicted conscience about your true relationship with God. And so again I ask, "Are you a Christian?" "Are you a follower of Jesus?"

"A certain ruler asked (Jesus), 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone. You know the commandments: "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother."'

'All these I have kept since I was a boy,' he said.

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