

# Perspective

## First Called Christians

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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For my wife and I's 20th wedding anniversary, we decided to go to St. John's. And those of you that have been here for a little bit might remember the story of the lost car keys. This is the same vacation that I am talking about. We stayed on the side of the island that was called Coral Bay because it was less busy and less touristy than the other side of the island where most of the people go, which is Cruise Bay.

And when my wife and I go on vacations to places like this, we like exploring, we like adventure, and honestly, we like being as much as a local as we can. So we try to fake like we are locals there and just enjoying what they do. And one of the things that we were excited to do on the island was hike. I'm not sure many of you are aware of this, but on the island of St. John, 60% of the island is a national park, 60%, over half.

And so there are hiking trails all over the place. And on Sunday morning, we were there over the weekend, and we decided that we were going to take a hike that was called Ram's Head Trail. And it was called that because when you looked out over the water, it kind of looked like a ram's head at the end of the trail. The benefit of taking this hike, the reward, was once you got to the southernmost point of St. John, you had a 360-degree view of the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean.

On that Sunday, we decided to get up early and to do it to try to beat the heat, because every day we were there, the real feel was over 100 degrees, and the dew point was in the high 70s, low 80s. And that's not a great time to hike, if you don't know. And so we brought a bunch of water, and we took this hike, and it was beautiful the entire way. And once we got to the top and we looked around at this 360-degree view, it was beautiful.

We just stood there for a while trying to take it all in and admiring God's beauty and creativity. We were up there for a little bit by ourselves, and then a little while later, a family showed up, and we said hi, and we just admired the beauty together. No one talked much at first. After we were done admiring the beauty, we chatted a little bit and found out where they were from, and of course, we helped take pictures of each other, and we exchanged pleasantries.

We wished each other well, and the family decided to go out a little further on the edge. When they walked away, Carolyn, my wife looked at me and she said, "Do you think that they were believers?" And I said, "Yeah, I think so." We looked out over at them a little later as they were on the edge, and it looked like one of them had pulled out a Bible and they were leading a church service for their family.

And I thought, "Well, isn't this interesting?" And so we watched there for a little bit, and I said to Carolyn, "I think he has a Bible, and he's reading it to them." They came back from the edge, and they started to go back down the trail, and I couldn't help myself. And I asked them, I said, "Were you reading a Bible out there?" And he replied, "Yes." And so we chatted a little more, and Carolyn asked them a few more questions and said, "Are you guys believers?" And they said, "Yes." And so we talked and we said, "Yeah, we thought so just from our initial conversation." And so I have the question for you guys.

Have you ever just met somebody and you just knew they were a Christian? There's just something you feel something between you. There's something that you recognize about them. I'm sure all of you have had that experience, and it caused me to ask the question, how? How do we just understand, how do we pick out Christians amongst a group of people, and even deeper than that, what does it mean to be a Christian? What is it that we recognize about them?

Because we use this term all the time, Christian, Christian. There's many people in our world today that use that term of themselves simply because they live in what they believe is a Christian nation. I have conversations with individuals and I'll say, "Well, are you a believer? Are you a Christian?" They say, "Well, of course I am.

I'm an American." And I just scratch my head and go, "Okay." In 2023, this is the latest poll we have, 62% of Americans identify as Christian, 62%, that's over half, with 40% claiming Protestant, 19 Catholic, and 3% other, whatever the other is, all right? Now, 62 might seem like a lot, and it is compared to other countries, but this number has been declining drastically for many years.

I believe it was in the '80s that over 90% of Americans said they were Christian. That's how fast it has gone down. As I talk with these individuals that claim to be Christian, some of them say that they're Christian because they attend church. And I don't ask them how often they attend church. Maybe it's just Christmas and Easter, but they attend church and they feel that because they attend a church and that church teaches and believes Christian doctrine, that makes them a Christian.

It's almost like they're a part of the club. It's a country club, and some of them even become members. And so they think that because I'm a member of the church, I'm going to receive all of the benefits of being a part of that church, of course, the greatest one being eternal life. So, are you a Christian? Well, of course I am. I go to church. There's other people that would say, "Yeah, I'm a Christian." And I'll say, "Well, why are you a Christian? What makes you a Christian?" They say, "Well, because I was raised in a Christian home by Christian parents." And so they believe this makes them Christian simply by association.

They are born into it, and the same way that they received genes that made them have blonde hair and blue eyes, they think somehow they have received the gene of being a Christian, because I was raised in a Christian home. And finally, I have conversations with many people that believe they are Christian because they will say, "Well, Pastor, I'm a good person." Many people believe that they can gain this title of being a Christian by doing more good things than bad things.

And so the scales are going to tip in their favor. Now, I've never met or had a conversation with anybody that thought they were perfect, right? That's always a fun question to ask, "Well, do you think you're perfect?" Well, of course not, but I've done a lot of good things, right? And so, I'm going to be rewarded for that. But this idea that you can earn it, that there's going to be a scale that's going to weigh whether you are good enough or you weren't good enough in order to become a Christian.

So where does this term "Christian" even come from? And what does it mean if we are going to carry this term Christian? In Acts chapter 11:26, we do read that the disciples, the followers of Jesus, were first called Christians in Antioch. This is a location in the Middle East where Paul was, and they first began to use this term "Christian" to describe people that were following Jesus.

The term itself "Christian" literally means "follower of Christ" or "belonging to Christ." This is what the term meant. So those that felt they belonged to Christ would call themselves Christians. Now, as you continue in Scripture, the mark of a true Christian is not whether you go to church, it's not whether you were born in America, it's not whether your parents raised you in church.

The mark of a true believer, according to Scripture, is your love for others and your obedience to God's Word. 1 John 2:4 says, "Whoever says I know Him," speaking about Jesus, but does not do what He commands is a liar

and the truth is not in Him. Scripture teaches that you and I can spot a fellow believer by their love and by their obedience to God's commands.

Does this mean that you and I can just look at people and know perfectly who are believers and who are not? I don't believe so. And please tell me I am not the only person that looks at other people and makes that judgment call, right? You guys look at family members and friends and neighbors and people maybe sitting next to you in the pew, don't look at them now, right? And you go, well, I'm not really sure about that person. I mean, don't we look at the lives of other people and we kind of make that judgment call as to whether or not we are a believer or they're a believer.

And so we tried to decide that, and sometimes I felt guilty as a pastor doing that, and then I thought, "Wait a second, that's my job," right? I kind of want to know whether they're a believer or not. And if they're not, it means I want to go after them, right? I'm not judging them, but I want to speak the truth to them. I want them to know, is that wrong? Is it wrong for us to look at other people? I think Scripture does teach us that we can make an educated guess as we are looking at others.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, "By their fruit, you will recognize them." Right? By their fruit. By looking at their lives, you will recognize them. And here's the beautiful truth about that. Not only can we look at others' fruit and come up with this idea of, yeah, I kind of think they are, or maybe they're not. When people will ask me, "Hey, do you think so-and-so is a Christian?" I'm like, "Well, first off, I'm not God, so I don't know." It's a condition of the heart, and only God knows that, but by looking at their life, here is my guess.

That's how I respond to that question, because I don't know for sure.

Only God knows as we're all on this journey, but we can look at others, and we also can then look in the mirror at our own lives and say, "Does my life, do my actions, does my love show others that I am a follower of Jesus?" And so this morning, as we wrap up this series that we've been calling perspective, I want to look at some of those directives, some of those commands, sometimes I'm

cautious of using that word, that we are given from Scripture that says, "If you are a Christian, if you are a follower of Jesus, here are the things that should define your life." These are the commands that God gives to us so that we can shine His glory to others, and are we doing a good job of shining the light of God for others if you and I are going to carry that term and that title, "Christian." So let's pray, and then I want to look at some specific commands that are given to us in Scripture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I come before You today and I thank You for Your Word that does teach us and guides us and directs us. It shows us how we're supposed to live. Father, if there are individuals here today watching online, listening on the radio that have not made that decision to follow you yet, and they're just kind of checking this whole thing out, and maybe they know other people that carry the title Christian, and they've come to the conclusion they are no different than they are.

May this be a reminder that if there are people here listening, watching, that they would not look at us, but Father, they would look at you, that we would be a mirror that reflects your image. Of course, we're doing the best that we can, but we're not perfect. We're going to make mistakes. We're going to mess up. And so, Father, would we point people towards you? You are the standard, you are the guide. Would you continue to pour your Spirit upon us today? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Two of the books in the New Testament that are probably two of the strongest books to get these directions or directives for our lives as followers of Jesus. If you ever wonder, what does it mean to follow Jesus? How am I supposed to live? 1 and 2 Peter are really good at giving us directives. And so we're going to spend a lot of time in those books, but certainly some others as well as we view what it is that we are supposed to do to shine for Jesus.

The first one is in 1 Peter chapter 1 verses 13 to 16, and Peter says this, "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed in His coming. As obedient children," and here's the command, "Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, but just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written, "Be holy because I am holy." This first command that I want to look at today, this directive that we are given, is that we are to be holy because God is holy.

Now, I know that's a term that we throw around in church a lot. If you've been raised in the church, this is not a new term to you, but what does it mean to be holy? Holy, in its very simplest definition, means to be set apart. It means to be different. In this idea of living a Christian life, it means that you and I no longer do the things that we once did, because we are not led by our desires, but we are led by God's Spirit.

And oftentimes, our internal desires in God's Spirit are in contradiction to each other, and so when we are trying to be holy, it means that we are trying to be obedient to Him. One of the things that we have talked about a lot in this series is the idea of self-control. It's a fruit of the Spirit that when you confess Christ as your Savior, you have this ability to have self-control, and so you can say no to yourself and to others.

Isn't that good? Isn't it good that we can say, "No, God gives us the ability to do that." Be holy because God is holy. Peter goes on in chapter 2 verses 9 through 10 to say, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.

For once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had received mercy, or had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. You and I have the opportunity because of the Spirit living in us and through us to share what Jesus has done for us and to display the holiness of God. We get to declare His praises.

Peter says to us, "You are now part of a holy nation." Now I want to pause here for a little bit. I think you all are aware of this, but if you're not, or Peter is not saying here that the holy nation we're part of is the United States of America. I hope you all hear that, okay? You know that's not what Peter is talking about here. Peter is talking about something beyond geographical borders or the land that you were born in.

He is saying that you are now part of the kingdom of God. He is not drawing lines politically or geographically in our world. He's saying, "You have now become a special people, a chosen people. You are now part of this new kingdom, a new nation, the kingdom of God." We're going to talk about that a little more next week of what does it mean to be a part of the kingdom of God, to be a holy nation.

James tells us in chapter 1 verse 21, "Therefore, because you belong to this new nation, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the Word planted in you which can save you." As you and I grow in our walk with God, as we grow in our faith with God, we continue to eradicate our lives of all moral filth and evil. Now I always feel like I need to tell you this.

This happens at different times and different for different individuals. This is where grace and truth comes in because we are all at a different walk in our journey with God. We're all at a different place. And so if God has revealed a moral truth to you, when another brother or sister hasn't been convicted of that yet, I will tell you, it is good to share that truth with them, but it is equally good to offer grace to them.

So what does that look like practically? For those of us that are part of this family, part of the family of God, it would be going to somebody and saying, "You know what? Here is what I believe and why I believe it. I think you should believe it too, but if you don't, I will still love you." Wouldn't it be great if we were part of a family like that that could honestly say, "You know what? I believe this," whatever it is. I believe it's wrong, it's morally wrong for us as believers to do X.

And here's why I believe it. You give some scriptural support. You say, "This is why I believe it. Here's where I'm coming up with this. And I think you should believe that too. But if you don't, I will still love you." Wouldn't that be great to have that grace, to have that freedom, to say, "Okay, we're not all on the same spot in this journey." I remember growing up and my dad was a tool and die maker. My mom ran a daycare. And you know we went to church.

I've kind of shared this whole thing before, but a lot of my faith came because one of my best friends, his dad was the pastor of our church. And you know I would spend a lot of time at their house doing stuff, and you know we'd stay up late and we would watch Jay Leno and David Letterman, I guess that tells you how old I am. You know And sometimes his dad would just come down and he would just be like, "Why are you watching that garbage?" And we used to just be like, "Oh, it's fine, it's fine, just don't mind." you know Or certain movies that you would watch or whatever else, we're all at different spots in this journey.

Now I look back on that. Do any of you look back at what you watched, or things you listened to, or things you did, and you go, "Man, I can't believe I did that." Am I the only one that did-- Please tell me I'm not the only one. Okay, you don't need to raise your hand. You're like, "Not me, man, it's just you." All right, we're all in a different spot, all for grace. I love what Peter says in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 12 through 15. Look at this command.

"Live your lives in such a good way among the pagans, among the world, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Jump down to verse 15 and Peter says, "For it is God's will." So many times people will say, "Pastor, I just want to know God's will for my life. I just want to know what he wants me to do." Here it is, all right? Here is God's will. For it is God's will that by doing good, you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.

These are a few of my life verses. They're some of my favorite verses that Peter gives to us as followers of Jesus, that as a Christ follower, I am called to live such a good life that even if I am accused of wrongdoing, my character will still stand and the person that is doing the accusing will feel bad. Think about that. That's how I'm supposed to live my life. That God would be glorified by my good deeds and that my good deeds would silence the mouth of foolish men who are constantly fighting against God.

Here's what I found to be true in life, and I'm guilty of this as well, that when you don't like somebody, somebody in your life and you say, well, pastor, you're supposed to like everybody, I know that, but there's still people you just don't like, right? There's people you struggle with. When you don't like somebody, you define them by their worst words and their worst actions. That's how you see them. That's probably why you don't like them, because that's how you view them by their worst words and by their worst actions.

But when you do like somebody, a friend, somebody you get along with, you define that person by their best words and their best actions. And the problem then is it's why in our world today, we can have one individual that's in the public somehow, and this group of people can look at that individual and say, man, that person is a saint. They are honoring God. They are such a great, great person.

And then this group of people over here looks at him and goes, "Oh, I can't stand that person." It's the same person, but this group over here is defining them by their greatest words, by their greatest actions, and this group is looking at them and defining them by their worst words and their worst actions. And Peter is telling us as followers of Christ, of Christ, that you and I are to live in such a way that even if you were defined by your worst words and your worst actions, it would still cause people to worship God.

Think about that. Now, none of us are perfect in this, but I want to live my life in such a way that even if people are going to define me by my worst words and worst actions, that God would still be praised. And please, I don't ever want to be defined by my worst words and worst actions. None of us do. We go on to 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 7 through 10. Peter tells us this, "The end of all things is near.

Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. And each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. Peter tells us to be clear-minded.

And in order to be clear-minded, it's only common sense that you would be able to clear your mind of all of the junk that can fill it, that you would be careful what you put in your mind because whatever you put in your mind wants to take up residence. And all of us know this to be true. If you have had kids, you have even taught this to them, whether you realized it or not, because you have used the phrase to your kids, garbage in, garbage out. Peter tells us, "Be careful about what you put in your mind."

You need to be able to be clear-minded so that you can pray and so that you can see truth for what it is." Don't be persuaded by those that live in the world. Don't be persuaded by news channels and internet feeds and podcasts. Don't fill your mind with things that are going to want to take up residence there which are not honoring to God. Because when you put those things in your mind, it's hard to be clear-minded. And so Peter says, "Don't do that."

Instead, fill your mind with the Word of God." And things will become so much more clear. He says to love each other deeply. Did Peter say, "Love those that you like?" No, love everybody. Love each other deeply. It's easy for us to be persuaded to have hate.

It's easy for us to not be clear-minded towards others, but we are commanded to love others well. Last two, this one comes from Jude chapter 1 verses 20 through 23. But to you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Therefore, be merciful to those who doubt. Save others by snatching them from the fire to others show mercy mixed with fear, hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. We read here, "To be merciful to those who doubt." That was an eye-opener when I read that again. "Are you merciful to those who doubt? Are you merciful to those who don't believe what you believe?"

Do you show mercy or do you show hate?" Is it your desire, as Jude says here, to rescue others from death? Are you trying to snatch them out of the fire? Or do you look forward to God's wrath being brought upon them? You know, it's easy when somebody disagrees with you. It's easy to get in our little Christian bubble and say, "Okay, I'm not supposed to be mad at them. I guess I'm going to pray for them, but I can't wait until they get what's coming to them." Right?

Jude says, "No, no, that's not what that means. We are to love others. We are to have mercy for others." Even to the point that he says, "We are to do our best to snatch others from the fire." This can be dangerous work, and sometimes when you're trying to snatch others from the fire, you know what? You get burned in the process. And it caused me to ask this question, when is the last time you were burned trying to rescue somebody from the fire?

Can I say, if you don't have scars, maybe you are living too safe. When is the last time you have been burned trying to rescue somebody from the fire? Last one, James 5:7, James says, "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains." James says, "Be patient."

Wait patiently, and it is hard for us to have patience." This is honestly one of the things that even though I desire to have, I can honestly tell you I've never prayed for it because that's just too dangerous of a prayer. To pray for patience. Patience is hard. Think about the things where maybe you and I lack patience or struggle when maybe we're sick and we just want to get better.

When we're in pain and we want the pain to go away, it could be physical pain, it could be emotional pain, and it's just hard to have patience in those moments. Thinking back of a child opening presents on Christmas morning, it's hard to have patience, isn't it? Maybe it's saving up for something that you want to buy, and it's so hard to wait to make sure that you have the money to pay for it. For some, it's hard to have patience to get married or to find your spouse.

You just desperately want to begin a family and you want God to provide that to you, and it's hard to have patience. And for all of us, isn't it hard to have patience in waiting for the Lord to return and bring us home? Those of us that are older are just like anytime. Anytime. College students and younger, I know you're like, "Well, let me experience A, B, C, D first. No, trust me, just let them come, all right? Let them come. None of that is worth it compared to that. Patience is difficult.

James says that the farmer knows better than to worry about things that he can't control. He can't control the rain. He can't control the outcome of the crops. He can only do what he can do. And so you and I need to exhibit patience. The goal of this entire series has been that you and I would live our lives for Jesus, that we would trust Him, that we would put our faith in Him, and that you and I would not be afraid to be different, because that's really what it means to be holy, to be set apart, to be different.

Different is good. It's okay to be different. As your friends and classmates and co-workers are talking about the latest show that's on TV or the latest song that is out, maybe you have no idea what they're talking about because you've just said, "You know what? I don't want that anymore in my life." Maybe somebody is talking about things that are going on in the world, and you have no idea what they're talking about because you said, "You know what? I just got rid of Facebook, I got rid of all that stuff because it wasn't good for me.

There was too much garbage in the mix of it." Maybe you're different because you control your tongue, and so in your workplace or at school, or wherever you're at, you no longer gossip and you do your best not to cuss. Maybe your coworkers come up to you and don't raise your hand. Some of you have had this happen, I'm sure.

Some of your coworkers come up to you and they say, "Man, would you stop working so hard, you're making us look bad." And you say, "I'm sorry, that's not my goal to make you look bad, but I just want you to know that when I am working, I'm not working for my boss that's sitting over there in that chair, I'm working for God. And I just want to do my best all the time. I'm sorry I don't want to make you look bad. You're different because unlike much of the world in which we live, material possessions is not your ultimate goal.

There's nothing wrong with them, but they're not your goal. You know they won't buy you happiness. Maybe for you, you're different because you have moral standards, an idea of right and wrong that come from the Word of God. And can I tell you that the truth and the Word of God never changes? We're going to talk about this a little more next week, but I honestly believe that we are living in a time where God has given us over to a depraved mind, where there are so many people that call things that are right, wrong, and things that are wrong right.

And we're going to talk about that. Romans chapter 1, if you want to read through that in preparation. You and I stand on the morals that come from His Word, and you know what? People aren't going to like you when you stand on the Word. They're not going to like you when you have an absolute truth, but that's what it means to be different. We're commanded to never stop growing in our faith, to continue this transformation into Christlikeness one step, one day at a time. We are told to keep shining for Him.

We are told to go and make disciples. We are told to be the change. And it's all for His glory because His glory is our good. Let me close in prayer. Heavenly Father, as we continue to try to figure this thing out, for those of us that carry this title of Christian, may we do our best to allow Your Spirit to live through us so that when others look at us, we would just be a mirror that's reflecting your image, that we would live in such a way that it points people towards you and not away from you.

God, again, that you would receive the praise. There's not a single person in here that is perfect and has done everything right. It's not about earning our salvation. That was a free gift that You gave to us. But it's about doing our best to live for you, knowing that that's truly what's best for us. May we trust your intentions? May we trust You with everything we are. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.