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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #27
December 15, 2019

Sermon Summary #27

The Five Marks of a True Disciple, or Who is a Christian and how might we know? John 8:31-47

I can't think of a time in history when there was as much confusion about what it is to be a Christian as there is in our day. For some, being a Christian is identifying with a particular political party and always voting for its candidate. For others, it is attending church on a regular basis and being generous with one's income to support the work of ministry. Then there are those who think that as long as they avoid certain scandalous sins, they are Christians. Perhaps you've come across people who say they are Christians for the simple fact that they aren't atheists. They affirm their belief in a supreme, supernatural being, and conclude from that that they are saved and spiritually safe.

So what does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Who is and who is not a true believer, and how can we ever know for sure? Some may push back on me at this point and insist that it is either self-righteous or judgmental even to attempt to answer such a question. After all, to answer this question one must draw boundaries and insist that some are on the inside and some are on the outside. In our day of radical inclusivism and political correctness, this may strike some as arrogant, divisive, and even discriminatory. Jesus would disagree.

In our passage today he speaks explicitly to the question of who is and who is not a disciple of his and gives us clear and unmistakable marks by which we may know the difference.

Five Marks/Signs/Characteristics of a True Disciple of Jesus

In John 8:30 we read that "many believed in" Jesus. What does this mean? Did Jesus himself regard their "belief" as genuine, as saving, as an indication that they truly embraced and trusted him and loved and treasured him? He actually leaves it an open question until later in this chapter. But he proceeds to give us several tests that we can apply that will help us discern and know if their belief, or even our belief, is real and saving.

To say that someone may "*believe*" in Jesus but not be saved may strike you as odd. But you need to know that "belief" is not always the same. Back in John 2:23-25 we read this:

"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:23-25).

Some people "believe" because of their intellectual fascination with the theological complexity of Christian truth claims. They find it intriguing. Others "believe" in the sense that they are infatuated with an individual's personality. Some "believe" because they are captivated by the supernatural power that they see. Still more "believe" because they see it as a pathway into a community where they can find friendship and love.

Obviously, there were many in our Lord's day who "believed" because they enjoyed the earthly or material benefits that came to them when they followed Jesus. This was certainly the case with those who followed him after he miraculously fed 20,000 people from a handful of fish and a few loaves of bread. If you asked most people on the street today if they "believe" in Jesus, they will say Yes. But what they mean is that they "believe" he truly existed and that he was a good man.

But all such so-called "belief" falls short of saving faith. It is not the sort of belief that entrusts itself to Jesus and loves Jesus and treasures him above all earthly gain. How do we know that those who "believed" in Jesus (John 8:30) were not saved? We know it because John goes on to tell us that they were indifferent to Jesus' word (v. 37), and that they were seeking to "kill" Jesus (v. 37), and they were "children of the devil" (v. 44), "liars" (v. 55), and actually picked

up stones to stone him to death (v. 59). If there is any lingering doubt, consider the fact that they accused Jesus of being a Samaritan and of being demonized (v. 48)!

Look again at v. 31. There Jesus speaks of those who are **“truly”** his disciples. In other words, there are those who *claim* to be “disciples” of Jesus who in fact are not. “Truly” means “really, genuinely.” Some who claim to know Jesus are authentic disciples and some are inauthentic.

So, how can we know if someone’s “belief” is the sort that truly saves? How can we know who is “truly” a disciple and who is not? Jesus gives us five distinguishing marks.

(1) *The genuine Christian or true disciple of Jesus is he/she who abides in the teachings of Jesus (vv. 31-32, 37).*

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (v. 31). The mark of true, saving faith, the mark of a genuine disciple is abiding in the “word” of Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t say “words” (plural), but “word” (singular). This suggests that he has in mind the totality or sum of all he says. When he claims to be “the bread of life” (John 6:35) and “the light of the world” (John 8:12) and declares that he is “not of this world” (John 8:23) but has come “from above” (John 8:23) and that he is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) and that he is the “good shepherd” who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11), this constitutes his “word” that must abide in us if we are truly his disciples.

It means more than we simply say, “Yes, all that you say, Jesus, is true.” To abide in his “word” is to love it, to ingest it, to delight in it, to trust it, to remain in it in terms of obedience to what it calls on us to do.

Jesus doesn’t say here that if you abide in my word you *will become* my disciples, as if abiding is an experience that is yet future. No. Abiding isn’t a stage in your Christian experience that you attain somewhere down the road, beyond mere belief. True disciples are those who abide now.

But what does Jesus mean when he says that a true disciple abides **“in”** his word? John Piper answered this question by saying that the word of Jesus, the teaching and revelation found in Jesus, is like a force field, like a magnetic field such that those who are “in” it come under its sway and its irresistible attracting power.

The force or power or appeal of this word is bound up in several things. There is its **truth**. You are persuaded that what Jesus says is true, without qualification or compromise. There is also a **beauty** in the word of Jesus, not the sort of beauty that one looks for in the Miss Universe pageant. This is spiritual and moral beauty. It holds you entranced and captivated. The magnetic appeal of the word of Jesus is also due to its **value**. It is a treasure that transcends all earthly wealth. It has the power to impart grace to your heart, bringing forgiveness, and peace to your soul, overcoming anxiety and fear.

And thus to “abide” in this word means that you do not cease to believe it as true and that you elevate its value above all worldly possessions and that you trust its power to ground your hope and sustain your confidence that God will do all that he has promised.

This is our Lord’s way of saying that momentary, flash-in-the-pan commitment to Christ means nothing. ***Discipleship is not a sudden, short-lived enthusiasm about Jesus but a life-long love affair!*** That doesn’t mean we live a perfect life. No one does. It doesn’t mean we won’t fail or that we won’t sin or that there won’t be seasons in life when our zeal diminishes and our intimacy with the Lord suffers. But to “abide” in his word does mean that through even the most spiritually dry of times and the most serious struggles with sin we continue to cling to Christ, continue to hope in him, continue to call upon him to help us and bring us back into a vibrant relationship with him.

And it’s not just that we abide in his word, but as v. 37 says, his word must find “a place” in our hearts. We abide in his word and his word abides in us. Ask yourself this question:

“Does the word of Christ operate in your life? Do you give it the value and honor that it is due? Does it play a vital, decisive, and determinative role in your thinking and choosing? Does it give direction to your life as

a whole? When faced with crucial ethical decisions, do you turn first and foremost to the word of Christ as found in the written Word of God?"

To "abide" in the "word" of Jesus is to submit to it as authoritative. I often speak of ***"the functional authority of Scripture."*** By that I have in mind the way that Scripture actually functions or works to shape what we believe to be true and what we reject as false. To abide in his word is more than checking the box where we are asked if we believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. To abide in his word means that when our lives are rebuked by Scripture, we repent; and when our beliefs are contrary to Scripture, we change; and when our values are inconsistent with Scripture, Scripture wins!

(2) The Christian is he/she who is free from the enslaving power of sin (vv. 33-36).

Last week I mentioned four specific types of freedom that Christians experience because of what Jesus has done for us. There was (1) freedom from the condemnation of sin; (2) freedom from the Law of Moses; (3) freedom from the compulsion of sin; and (4) freedom from the conscience of other Christians.

Let me say a few brief words about the third of these: freedom from the compulsion of sin. That is probably the primary point that Jesus was making in vv. 34-36.

Jesus said that "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (v. 34). His point is that we are enslaved to the power of sin in our hearts. Before we were born again, sin dominated our experience. We couldn't help but sin because that was both our nature and desire. We didn't want *not* to sin. Sin was our delight and to it we were in bondage. It is deep-seated in the human soul. There are compelling desires from which we can't break free. Only Jesus can't liberate our hearts from this inner compulsion. And when he does, we are ***"free indeed"*** (v. 36).

To be free from the inner compulsion to sin means that we find in ourselves, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the ability and the desire to stop wicked, self-centered behavior and to bring our lives into conformity to the will of God. As much and as often as I may fail to do what is right in God's eyes, I'm never enslaved to disobedience. I am never without the power, desire, and opportunity to follow God's revealed will. This is, as Jesus said, freedom "indeed"!

(3) The Christian is he/she who has God as Father and experiences him in the fullness of his love for his children and reflects his character in their behavior (vv. 39-44).

There are, ultimately, only two families in the world, and every human being is a member of one or the other. Each family is headed by a father: God or the Devil.

The Pharisees based their confidence on the fact that they were physical descendants of Abraham. Earlier, in John 8:33, they responded to Jesus by saying, "we are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." Jesus says in v. 37 that in one sense they are the "offspring of Abraham." Yes, says Jesus, you are his physical descendants. You are Jews in the physical sense of the term. But this counts for nothing!

What matters isn't your physical lineage but your spiritual faith. Having Abraham's blood in your veins doesn't matter. It only matters if you share Abraham's faith in your hearts. This was Paul's point in Romans 9.

"Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, . . . It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (Rom. 9:6-8).

If you were truly the spiritual offspring of Abraham, "you would be doing the works Abraham did" (v. 39). In fact, far from doing what Abraham would do, "you are doing the works your father," the devil, "did" (v. 41). You can well imagine how incensed and enraged the Pharisees became on hearing this. They loudly protested: "We were not born of sexual immorality" (v. 41). This is an obvious reference to the fact that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was pregnant before she was married. Forgive my language, but they are saying in no uncertain terms: "You're a bastard!" In essence, they are saying, "We are morally superior to you. How dare you say that we aren't true children of Abraham!"

Their claim to have God for their Father is contradicted by the fact that they show no family resemblance, spiritually speaking, of course. A person will always reflect the character of his/her father.

John 8:44 is a stunning statement that has led some to actually accuse Jesus of anti-semitism. That, in spite of the fact that Jesus is himself Jewish, a physical descendant of Abraham. Look at what he says:

“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (v. 44).

We need to slow down here because there are several important points to observe.

First, these people whom Jesus calls children of the devil are religious, law-abiding, theists! They believe in one God. They believe he is the Creator of all things. They believe he is King and sovereign over all of creation. Yet, they are lost! Unsaved! Unregenerate! Why? Because they have no relationship with Jesus. They do not believe in him. They do not love him and follow him.

Second, this passage also tells us that behind the malicious plots and plans to kill Jesus is Satan. This probably comes as no surprise to you, but it suggests that behind the persecution of Christians worldwide today stands Satan. Whatever legislation is passed that deprives Christians of religious liberty, whatever steps are taken to imprison Christians and kill them, whatever lawsuits are filed to silence the voice of Christians, Satan is the ultimate instigator.

Third, these men in our Lord’s day prided themselves in their ethnic identity. But this isn’t a problem unique to Jewish people. Jesus isn’t singling them out as if they are any more guilty of this than other ethnicities. Anyone who thinks that their physical heritage or their social status or their financial success or their moral behavior is a guarantee of a right standing with God needs to hear the words of Jesus.

Jesus would say the same thing to Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or religious Gentiles here in OKC. The danger to all people is the tendency toward self-justification based on something other than God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ.

So, what does it mean to live in the reality of God as Father? ***How does one experience God as Father?*** Sadly, many have a tragic misunderstanding, a caricature, if you will, of what it means to have God as Father. Instead of a Father, they envision God as something of a ***coach***. Joining the church is like making the varsity team. God doesn’t communicate in loving and tender terms to us, but yells: “Run faster! Jump higher! Two more laps!” Our responsibility reduces to that of performing at a higher level of competition. Train hard, excel in the game, and if not, you might get demoted to junior varsity or even kicked off the team entirely.

Others view God less as a Father and more as a ***teacher***. Being a Christian reduces to studying harder, learning more, memorizing texts of Scripture and certain doctrines, and regurgitating it all on test day. The important thing in your relationship with God is getting all “A’s” and graduating on time. God’s primary role is to make sure you spell his name right and to assign detention to any of his students who get out of line.

Then there are those who view God as the ***boss***. Getting a good job in the kingdom is priority one. Christians are little more than employees, there to work for God and to serve him for a wage. Be sure you get to work on time and put in your 8 hours. God exists primarily to fill out performance reviews and to decide who gets a raise, a promotion, or who gets fired.

No! No! To have God as your Father is to know him as the most loving and affectionate person in the universe. It is to experience his tenderness and protection and provision. It is to know that no matter what you may encounter in life, you have God as Father to guard you and heal you and love you and assure you that in the end all will be well.

Some of you struggle with this because the relationship with your earthly father was, and is, horrible. And you find it difficult not to project onto God the Father the failures and sins of your earthly dad.

I remember hearing a prominent Christian leader telling the true story of his encounter with a young lady who had come forward at a conference gathering. She was kneeling in front of the platform. Her hair covered her face, as she sought to hide the bruises. When the speaker knelt down next to her and began his prayer with, “Dear Heavenly Father,” she immediately stopped him. Turning upwards to look at him, he saw the bruises and cuts and despair in her

eyes. “Mister,” she said, “I’ve had just about all the ‘father’ I can stomach right now.” She didn’t merely speak the word “father.” She spat it out as if it were literally distasteful in her mouth.

The only solution to this problem is to direct someone’s attention to Jesus. Find in him everything the Father wants you to experience of himself. Remember what Jesus said to Philip, who asked him: “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’” (John 14:8-9).

(4) The Christian is he/she who hears the words of God (vv. 43-47).

Look especially at vv. 43 and 47. The problem here isn’t that the Pharisees were literally or physically deaf. The words of Jesus were heard by them all. They understood what he was saying. In fact, this is why they were determined to kill him. They knew he was claiming to be God incarnate, the Messiah of Israel.

The problem was that they hated what they heard. They refused to heed it or obey it or embrace it as truth. They didn’t like the truth of what he said. “Because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me” (v. 45). The problem isn’t that the truth is too deep or complex or mysterious. The problem is with the heart of the unbeliever. “I *don’t want* to believe what you say because then I would be accountable to God.”

The Christian, on the other hand, the true, genuine disciple of Jesus, truly hears and seeks to obey what God says – “Whoever is of God hears the words of God” (v. 47). That doesn’t mean we always fully grasp what is said in Scripture. But it does mean that our deepest desire is to obey whatever we do understand.

(5) The Christian is he/she who loves the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 42).

“If God were your Father, you would love me” (v. 42). To love the Son of God, Jesus Christ, entails far more than simply honoring him. We honor our President, but not everyone loves him! We respect certain individuals for their achievements, but we may not love them. I admire a lot of people for their skills or intelligence or accomplishments on the athletic field, but I don’t love them. I fear certain people, but I don’t love them. I even obey certain individuals in our society, but that doesn’t mean I love them.

The one ultimate criterion to determine who is and who is not a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, is to discern whether or not he/she loves him.

There are multitudes of people in our society and across the globe who identify as monotheists. They say they believe there is only one God and that he is the supreme sovereign creator of all things. But they do not love the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Some of them are probably sitting in this service today. Many of them are sitting in churches throughout this city. They are probably bowing their heads, closing their eyes, reciting prayers, and even singing hymns and songs of praise, but they don’t love Jesus.

Conclusion

I have often mentioned an experience I had in January of 1991 while attending a conference in Anaheim, California. I was new to the things of the Spirit, still searching and asking questions. One thing I couldn’t deny was the love that these people had for Jesus. I remember distinctly on my plane trip home, sitting and reflecting on what I had experienced and what I had seen and heard among the people at the conference. The phrase instantly leapt into my mind:

“These people have an unrestrained, extravagant, unashamed affection for Jesus.”

At that time, I don’t know if I did. If I did have an affection for Jesus, but it was restrained, controlled, and I was somewhat ashamed for others to see it in my life or in the way I worshiped him. No more!

This, then, is what it means to be a Christian. Certainly there are other things that we could mention such as: being born again; believing by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; knowing and trusting in the truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus; and so on.

But here Jesus gives us five unmistakable characteristics of the person who has truly been born again.

- (1) Do you abide in the teachings of Jesus?
- (2) Are you free from the enslaving power of sin?
- (3) Do you know God as your Father?
- (4) Do you hear the words of God and cherish them?
- (5) Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ with a love that is unrestrained, extravagant, and unashamed?