

Christianity Explored

Continuing As a Christian

Selected Texts

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Introduction

The past few Sundays we have been exploring Christianity by looking primarily at the Gospel of Mark.

I have asserted that the heart of Christianity is a *person*—Jesus of Nazareth. To that end we have answered three questions:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus come?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

We have seen that the answer to the first question—*who is Jesus?*—is given by Mark in the very first verse of his Gospel. He says that Jesus is “the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). That is, Jesus is God in human form. Mark gives five evidences that Jesus is God in human form because he shows us that Jesus has power and authority from God to teach, heal, calm storms, raise the dead, and (most importantly and significantly) forgive sin.

The answer to the second question—*why did Jesus come?*—is that Jesus came to rescue rebels (Mark 2:17). The Bible teaches that we are all rebels against a holy God (because of our sin), and that we are all in danger of facing God’s judgment. Each of us deserves to pay the penalty for our sin against God and his holy law. However, Jesus came and paid the penalty on our behalf so that God’s judgment fell on Jesus and not on us.

And finally, the answer to the third question—*what does it mean to follow Jesus?*—is that Jesus requires a change of allegiance (Mark 8:34). We are to deny ourselves, die to self, and live entirely and completely for Jesus. Stated differently, Jesus calls us to “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

The movie *Saving Private Ryan*,² set during World War II,

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored: How to Run the Course* by Rico Tice (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2003), 135-140.

² *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg; prod. Ian Bryce, Mark Gordon and Gary Levensohn; DreamWorks SKG / Paramount Pictures, 1998).

tells the story of a group of men who are given orders to rescue one single man from behind enemy lines in Normandy. We are told that his three brothers have all recently been killed in action, leaving him as the only child of a single mother. When the US Army Chief of Staff hears about the situation, he gives orders to protect this precious remaining son, Private James Ryan, and he sends out a team of soldiers to bring him back alive.

The rescue mission is extremely perilous, and one by one it claims the soldier's lives. At one point their captain says, "This Ryan better be worth it. He'd better go home, cure some disease or invent the longer-lasting light bulb."

But the orders to rescue Ryan are obeyed, and in the final battle scene, set on a heavily-shelled bridge, as the Captain himself dies, he whispers his last words to a dumbstruck Private Ryan: "James—earn this—earn it."

Fifty years pass and, in the closing shots of the movie, we see an elderly James Ryan returning to Normandy with his wife, children and grandchildren. He kneels beside the grave of the captain and, as tears fill his eyes, he says, "My family is with me today. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I've earned what all of you have done for me."

Then he turns to his wife and asks with some anxiety, "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man. . . ."

In a way, the last words of the captain—"Earn it"—have crippled Ryan. Could he ever live up to the deaths of those young men? Private Ryan has lived his entire life with the last words of his rescuer ringing in his ears.

But Jesus' last words—recorded in John 19:30—are very different. As he dies to rescue us, Jesus doesn't say, "Earn it." He doesn't say that he gave his life to rescue us; now we must live in such a way as to earn his approval. Instead, Jesus says: "It is finished." They, too, are words that have the power to affect the course of a life.

As Jesus died on the cross to rescue you and me from sin, judgment and hell, he uttered those staggering words: “It is finished.” The word in the Greek is actually a single word, “tetelestai.” It is in the perfect tense and it means, “It is complete.” This is the word a builder might shout when he places the final slate on the roof of a house he has built. Or the word a couple might use when they finally pay off their mortgage. “Tetelestai! It is finished!”

And notice that it’s not, “I am finished,” as if this was a last desperate, self-pitying cry of surrender, a concession of defeat or failure. No, it’s an exclamation of completion, of achievement, of triumph—“It is finished!”

So, as he dies to rescue me, Jesus doesn’t say, “Freddy—earn this—earn it.” No, he says, “Freddy, it is finished! Your sin—past, present and future—is all forgiven.” It is finished. I can’t earn it, I can’t pay for it, and I have done nothing to deserve it. But Jesus died for me to pay for my sin, to bring me into a relationship with my loving Creator.

But this wonderful relationship won’t be plain sailing. Christians will face opposition: from the world around them, from their own sinful nature, and also from the devil, who wants to undermine the Christian’s relationship with God.

Lesson

In today’s lesson we see that though Christians encounter opposition, they also experience assurance. We will examine this under two headings:

1. Christians Encounter Opposition.
2. Christians Experience Assurance.

I. Christians Encounter Opposition

First, notice that Christians encounter opposition.

Once a person becomes a follower of Christ, that is, a Chris-

tian, things do not necessarily get easy for that person. In fact, a Christian almost always discovers all kinds of difficulty, trial, and even opposition come into his or her life.

The kinds of opposition that a Christian faces can be broadly placed into three distinct categories.

A. *Christians Face Opposition from the World*

First, Christians face opposition from the world.

If you stand up for Christ's words, if you remind people that they are living in God's world, that they're accountable to him, there will be times when you will be frozen out by people—even by those you love. It can be a painful experience to find yourself politely ignored or even verbally attacked by those closest to you. Jesus himself found that those who thought they knew him best—those he'd grown up with—resented the claims he made, and were offended by him. So if people are offended by us, it's a great comfort to know that things were no different for Jesus. In John 15, verses 18 onwards, Jesus warns us very clearly about this: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

B. *Christians Face Opposition from Our Sinful Natures*

Second, Christians face opposition from our sinful natures.

As Paul says in Romans 7, verses 18 and 19: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." And if that is true for Paul, who is one of the most godly Christians who ever lived, then it will certainly be true for us.

C. *Christians Face Opposition from the Devil*

And third, Christians face opposition from the devil.

What do you think about the devil? For lots of people, he's a joke figure: the man in the red tights with the unconvincing horns and the plastic pitchfork. He's not a threat; he's a joke.

The Bible insists that there are evil powers at work who will try to make you doubt the truth, who will lie to you and tempt you. The Bible explains that there are powerful, complex and, above all, intelligent forces that are out to undermine the Christian and anyone who is even thinking of becoming one. In fact, the apostle John says that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one [i.e., the devil]" (1 John 5:19b).

Jesus teaches that the devil's opposition is serious. Even when people are listening to God's word being taught, he is at work. The last thing he wants is for people to believe in Jesus and be saved. Jesus points this out in Luke chapter 8, verse 12, making it plain that people can hear God's words but then find that "the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Christians are involved in an unseen spiritual battle. Please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 6, and notice verses 10-12:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

How does the devil fight? He schemes. He fights subtly, with no moral principles, and no code of ethics.

Jesus calls him the "father of lies" (John 8:44). He's always trying to put lies into people's heads—things like, "Look, God's invisible. He's invisible because he's not there! This isn't the real world. This isn't reality. Forget about it."

Another name for the devil in the Bible is "the accuser" (Revelation 12:10). And it's a very appropriate title, because he's al-

ways pointing to your failures. “If you were a real Christian, you would stop sinning. How can you call yourself a Christian when you keep doing this or that?” Or, “Remember that terrible thing you did. There’s no way you can become a Christian.”

And when you hear things like that, it’s absolutely vital to remember those last words of Jesus: “It is finished.” That’s why Jesus came—because we’re sinners. Once you’ve put your trust in Jesus, it is finished!

Now, having said all that, let me say that to blame the devil for every single mishap, inconvenience or unpleasantness is unwise. It is dangerous to underestimate the devil’s power, but it can be equally damaging to overestimate it. The Bible says that—thanks to the cross—the devil has already been defeated. As Revelation 12:12 explains, “He knows that his time is short.”

II. Christians Experience Assurance

In the face of opposition from the world, from the sinful nature and from the devil, there are three great assurances that help Christians. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

A. Christians Experience Assurance from the Witness of the Spirit

First, Christians experience assurance from the witness of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit gives Christians the strength and the desire to battle against their sinful natures. In fact, this feeling of inner conflict—between the Spirit and the sinful nature—is strangely comforting, because it confirms that the Spirit is real and that he is at work.

The Spirit also assures the Christian that he or she is indeed one of “God’s children,” no longer separated from him, and destined to be with him in heaven. For Christians in the midst of opposition, that assurance of eternal life is very precious.

B. Christians Experience Assurance from the Word of the Father

Second, Christians experience assurance from the Word of the Father.

Christians can also be sure of their relationship with God because of his promises to them in the Bible.

C. S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters* contains imaginary letters written by a senior devil to a junior devil. The senior devil wants to teach the junior devil how to cause a man who has become a Christian to waver in his faith. And the first tactic he recommends is to make the man rely totally on his feelings.

Now, don't get me wrong, our emotions are God-given—they're part of what it is to be human. But if they're all we have to go on, then we will start to doubt our faith.

No matter what we feel—and as all of us know, our feelings can change with the weather—there are certain things of which we can be sure. In times of anxiety, indecision, loneliness, or temptation, we must remind ourselves of those certainties by reading and trusting the words of the infinitely powerful, infinitely loving God.

Let me read you two of God's promises in the Bible. The first promise is found in Hebrews 13:5b:

. . . for he [i.e., God] has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

And the second promise is found in John 5:24. Jesus is speaking, and he says:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

George McClellan was born on December 3, 1826 in Phila-

delphia, Pennsylvania. A brilliant student, he entered the Military Academy at West Point. In 1846, he graduated second in his class and became an engineer. He served in the Mexican War, at West Point for a second tour, and in 1855 he was promoted to captain in the cavalry. He spent a year studying European armies and was a military observer during the Crimean War. On January 16, 1857, he resigned his commission and entered railroad engineering. Within a few years, he was named division president of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad.

On April 23, 1861, McClellan was named a Major General in the Ohio Volunteers. Within four months, he was in command of the entire Union Army. He had jumped five ranks between times of active service and was only four months removed from the railroad when he was given command. In August 1861, he wrote his wife, “I don’t feel any different than I did yesterday. Indeed, I have not yet put on my new uniform. I am sure, however, that I am in command of the Union Army because President Lincoln’s order to that effect now lies before me.”

Reality is not determined by what we feel. It is determined by God’s promises, which tell me that I am a Christian, that I am forgiven and that I am going to heaven because of what Christ has done. God has given me his word about these things.

Time and again, when pastors visit people who are dying, they find that people often feel very guilty about a particular thing that they have done in their lives. You can ask the person, “Are you sorry? Have you asked God’s forgiveness? Have you asked the wronged person’s forgiveness?” And they will often answer “yes” to all three questions. But they still felt desperately guilty.

It’s at moments like these—when guilty feelings persist—that Christians need to trust the word of God. Look at 1 John 1:8-9:

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So if you're feeling guilty about something, even though you have already asked God for forgiveness, let me ask you this: "Do you think your sin is covered by the words 'all unrighteousness'?"

If so, do you trust God's promise here? God is promising that he will forgive *all* your sins—past, present and future. No matter what you've done, you are forgiven. You don't have to feel guilty anymore.

C. Christians Experience Assurance from the Cross of Christ

And third, Christians experience assurance from the cross of Christ.

As we've seen, Jesus doesn't tell us to "Earn it." He died saying, "It is finished."

You're in a relationship with God not because you deserve it, not because you've earned it or because you've done enough or been good enough, but because you've trusted in what Jesus has already done for you. You're at peace with God and you're going to heaven.

PCA pastor D. James Kennedy, who went to be with the Lord in September 2007, once said, "Assurance is having confidence of eternal life that is resting upon the sure foundation of Jesus Christ, but presumption is presuming ourselves to have eternal life when in fact our confidence is based on nothing more than the flimsy foundation of our own self-righteousness."

As the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Conclusion

So, in today's lesson we have seen that though Christians encounter opposition, they also experience assurance.

When Craig Barnes, author and former pastor of National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C. was a child, his father (who was also a minister) brought home a 12-year-old boy named

Roger. Roger's parents had died from a drug overdose. There was no one to care for Roger, so Dr. Barnes' parents decided they would just raise him as if he were one of their own sons.

At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home—an environment free of heroin-addicted adults! Every day, several times a day, Dr. Barnes heard his parents say to Roger:

- “No, no. That's not how we behave in this family.”
- “No, no. You don't have to scream or fight or hurt other people to get what you want.”
- “No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family.”

And in time Roger began to change.

Now, did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of the family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of Rev. Barnes. But did Roger then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. It was tough for him to change, and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love he had received.³

Becoming a Christian is a gift of God's grace. There is nothing we do to earn or deserve it. But, as Christians we face all kinds of opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil. We face that opposition and make changes because we are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

And we experience great assurance of our new status as children of God because of the witness of the Spirit, the Word of the Father, and the cross of Christ.

That is what enables us to keep continuing as a Christian. Amen.

³ Craig Barnes, author and pastor of the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.; from sermon “The Blessed Trinity” (5-30-99).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for Jesus Christ. We have learned that Jesus is the Son of God. We have also learned that Jesus came to rescue rebels such as ourselves. And we have learned that Jesus demands a complete change of allegiance from all who would follow him.

Becoming a Christian is a gift of your amazing grace. However, continuing as a Christian produces opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Thankfully, you give us assurance from the witness of the Spirit, the Word of the Father, and the cross of Christ that we truly are sons and daughters who have been adopted into your forever family.

I pray that everyone here today may know for certain that he or she is a child of God, and that you will indeed encourage him or her to continue as a Christian until we see Jesus face to face.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.