March 10, 2024

Scripture reference: 1 John 1:6-7

Message Title: The Evidence for Being a Christian

1 John 1:6-7

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Introduction: So we are about halfway through a series called Affirming Our Faith through the Apostle's Creed. Many of us may remember reciting the Apostle's Creed when we were young children. Sometimes we find ourselves memorizing words and regurgitating them without necessarily understanding what we are really saying. So in this preaching series, Pastor Kerry and Pastor Brian have broken down the Apostle's Creed line by line and each week, we spend time understanding what each part really means.

I remember when we took this same approach with the Lord's Prayer last year. Understanding what we mean when we say "Thy Will Be Done" as submission to God's omniscience and power or "Lead Us Not Into Temptation" as asking God to keep us from submitting to temptation had such an impact on me that I'll never pray this prayer the same way again.

For the last few messages in this current series, we have talked about what Jesus did for us and the price He paid to save us from our sins and assign His righteousness to us. This helps us to not just say the words, but to fully understand what we believe and what our faith is based on.

So today, I want to take a slight detour from the series and talk about What it means to be a Christian and follow Jesus. Just as we want to fully understand what we are saying with the Lord's Prayer and Apostle's Creed, it's important for us to know what we mean when we say **I Am A Christian.**

Let me start out by asking you a question. If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you"

We're going to talk about 4 bodies of evidence that a judge and jury would use to determine if the accusation is founded. But let's lay a foundation and first talk about the definition of a Christian.

Definition of a Christian:

A Pew Research study from 2021 revealed that 69% of Americans claim to be Christians. By the way, In the early 1990's, 90% of U.S. adults claimed to be Christians. So first of all, if in fact 69% of Americans were REALLY Christians, do you think our country would be in state of moral decline that it is in today, with abortion, redefining marriage, redefining gender, violence, racism, corruption, and so on?

And yet only 9% of those who identify as Christians really possess a Biblical Worldview, believing that the Bible is accurate and reliable. In another study by Barna Research, we find that 51% of U.S. adults **CLAIM** to have a biblical worldview. 51% who claim to have a Biblical view vesus 9% who actually do represents a big gap between what the Bible teaches and what people believe it teaches.

Let me give you some examples of the gap. Only 61% of those who identify as Christians believe that God is all knowing, all powerful, perfect and the just Creator of the universe who rules today. 72% argue that people are basically good. 66% say that **having** faith matters more than **which** faith you pursue. 58% believe that if a person is good enough or does enough good things, they can earn their way into heaven. Chip Ingram, the senior pastor at Venture Christian Church in California that we used to attend used to refer to some Christians as Cafeteria Christians. They pick pieces of the Bible that they want to believe and disregard those that don't fit with their actions and lifestyle.

Most of you probably know Jeff Foxworthy, the comedian who became famous with his bit, You might be a redneck if…. I read a message from some pastor who had a little fun with Jeff's model and created a list called, "You might be a Christian if.." Here are some things from his list

You might be a Christian if:

You eat at Chic Fil A at least one time a week

Your home looks like a Hobby Lobby ad

You accidentally said AMEN after reciting the Pledge of allegiance.

You switch the channel or mute the TV for most commercials.

You sometimes use the word fellowship in a sentence.

Your dog is named after someone in the Bible.

And one more for you football fans, you think that Tim Tebow was the best quarterback ever.

Webster's definition of a Christian is "one who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ " This is a good starting point, but it falls short of the biblical truth of what it means to be a Christian. Unfortunately, over time, the word "Christian" has lost a great deal of its significance and often refers to someone who is religious or has high moral values. George Barna will say that the word **Christian** has become somewhat of a generic term rather than a name that reflects a deep commitment to passionately pursuing and being like Jesus Christ

Many people who do not necessarily believe and trust in Jesus Christ consider themselves Christians simply because they go to church, or they live in a "Christian" nation. But going to church, serving others, simply believing in God, or being a good person does not make you a Christian. The Apostle's Creed states what we believe, but it's not good enough to just believe it. Even non-Christians believe that Jesus Christ existed as a historical figure. But as Christians, we believe that He was the Son of God and our Savior so what we believe has to drive our actions and our behaviors

So What is the definition of a True Christian?

Followers of Jesus Christ were first called "Christians" in Antioch **(Acts 11:26**) because their behavior, activity, and speech were like Christ. The word "Christian" literally means, "belonging to the party of Christ" or a "follower of Christ."

A true Christian is a person who has put faith and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, including His death on the cross as payment for sins and His resurrection on the third day**. John 1:12** tells us, "*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* The mark of a true Christian is love for others and obedience to God's Word (**1 John 2:4, 10)**. A true Christian is indeed a child of God, a part of God's true family, and one who has been given new life in Jesus Christ.

The Bible also teaches that the good works we do cannot make us acceptable to God**. Titus 3:5** says, *"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."* So, a Christian is someone who has been born again by God and has put faith and trust in Jesus Christ. **Ephesians 2:8** tells us that it is *"…by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."*

Luke 9:23 tells us that "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."*

There are a lot of ways that we can identify ourselves when someone you just meet says, tell me about yourself. I can say I'm an accountant, but that really just defines what I do. Or I can say I'm a father, but that really just talks about a role I have. Or I can talk about being an Italian but that is just my genetic DNA and heritage. But when I say I'm a Christian, I am defining who I AM. Each of these other identifiers have some preconceived perceptions and are subject to different interpretations. I remember people telling me when I became an accountant that I had too much personality to be an accountant. Accountants are boring. And some fathers focus more on providing for their family while others focus more on nurturing and loving them. Italians are all supposed to be romantic, but I destroyed that stereotype when I proposed to Jan 40 years ago. I took her out to a nice dinner, had the ring in my pocket and when the opportunity came to either get down on my knee and tell her how much I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, I looked deeply into her eyes and said, If I were to ask you to marry me, what would you say! How romantic is that!

But when I say I'm a Christian, there is no wiggle room in what that means. The Bible makes it clear and Jesus taught us by example what it means to follow Him. That doesn't mean that we don't fall short sometimes, but it's very clear what it means to be a Christian

Evidence for Being a Christian: So let's get back to the question I asked earlier. If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

In a trial, a defense attorney would present specific evidence on your behalf. Let's talk about 4 different bodies of evidence to support your claim of being a Christian. I'm going to use a series of questions for each body of evidence

SLIDE ONE:

Evidence Number One: Physical evidence or your behaviors and actions

- How do you live day to day? Do you live as if Jesus could return tomorrow? I've often asked people what they would do differently if they knew Jesus was coming back today and the answer should be "nothing."
- Are you in God's Word regularly? A 2023 Pew research study reveals that only 35% of people read scripture at least once a week and 45% say they NEVER read it
- Are you in church or meeting with our Christians regularly? **Hebrews 10:24-25** says *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near".* I saw another survey that said that said that U.S. adults who say they generally attend religions services once a month or more has dropped to 30% in 2022
- Do you talk about your faith with family and friends. Even if they are not followers of Jesus?
- Do you take a firm position as a Christian without fear of cultural or political pressure? We live in a very divided country right now. And the cancel culture puts us at risk if we don't agree with mainstream thinking.
- Do you pray before eating, even if you are in public?
- Do you volunteer and tithe? I've always believed that we only need two pieces of evidence to know what is important to you. Your checkbook and your calendar. People spend their time and money on what is important to them.
- Do you reflect your faith by doing good works? I saw another survey that revealed that only 23% of U.S. people over age 16 have formally volunteered through an organization as of 2023, while 51% said they informally helped a neighbor. Now of course remember that good works does not make us a Christian. But if we are a Christian, we want to do good works to affirm our faith. The Bible teaches us that faith is living and active.. if we do not have accompanying works, then faith is dead. **Matthew 5:16** tells us, *" In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*
- Do you generally love others? **1 Corinthians 13: 1-3** teaches us that "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing".*

SLIDE TWO:

Evidence Number Two: Witnesses or Interactions with others. A lawyer would call witnesses to the stand to talk about your character and relationships

- How many people that you come in contact with would testify that they saw Godly characteristics in you?
- Are you the same person in Walmart that you are in church? There is a famous scene from the Godfather when Michael Corleone is in the church acting as Godfather for the baby, while outside the church, he has hired people to kill all of the heads of the other families. Presenting himself as a Good Christian in the church but outside, not so much. I used to drive through my neighborhood and pass a car or person walking and if I recognized them, I would waive. One time, someone passed me and waived and I felt like I had dismissed them because I didn't waive back. Then it hit me. What difference does it make if I know the person or not. Waive to **EVERYONE.**
- How do others perceive your actions? Are you considered to be loving and considerate or self centered?
- Do you think of others before yourself? Our culture today seems to stress a me first attitude and whatever makes me happy.
- Are you kind and thoughtful or selfish and angry? When we walk in the spirit, the Fruits of the Spirit are reflective of who we are. A fig tree cannot produce an apple. **Galatians 5:22-23** tells us that *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law"* Is that what people see what they interact with you. Sometimes I might say something about someone or about something going on and not show kindness or goodness or self-control and Jan will simply say "Okay Pastor Rick". 3 simple words that bring me back to reality!
- How do you deal with adversity. It's easy to be faithful when everything is going well for you. Remember the story of Job**. Job 1:8-11** *"And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."* Non-Christians watch how Christians deal with problems and challenges. If we freak out when something bad happens, they may ask.. how strong can your faith really be? Do you trust God or not? Or only when things are going well?

- Do your actions reflect your words and beliefs? When I was 9 years old, someone picked a fight with me. I backed away and made a statement that I didn't fight because I was Catholic. Now you can imagine the grief I got from my father who used to be a boxer and never lost a fight and my older brother who was a clone of dad. BUT I can look back and honestly say I wasn't being a coward… I truly believed what I said. A Poll conducted by an Episcopal Church in 2021 reveals a huge gap between how believers perceive themselves and how non-believers look at Christians.
  Only 20% of Christians felt they were hypocritical while 55% of non-believers believed this about Christians. 71% of Evangelical Christians considered themselves compassionate while 15% of other religious groups and 12% of non-believers felt like Christians were compassionate. 60% of Evangelicals considered themselves honest while 7% of non-religious and 11% of other religions believed that.

SLIDE THREE:

Evidence Number Three: Your Testimony

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus tells us *"You will receive power when the Holy spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."*

- Can others give specific evidence of when you acted like a Christian? Not long ago, I was hit in the back end while sitting at a stop sign. I was furious because it came out of nowhere. I was legitimately stopped and this guy was not paying any attention and ran right into me. A policeman showed up and we pulled into a gas station to deal with the issue. While I was sitting in my car and the other driver was on the phone, I was stewing, ready to really lay into him. As I walked out of the car and approached the other driver to confront him, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the River Ridge decal on the back window of my vehicle, clearly visible when he hit me in the back end. And God immediately convicted me. The driver walked over to me and immediately apologized and said it was all his fault and I simply said… it's okay. It happens. The anger was gone. Again he apologized and I said again, it's okay. It happens. When he apologized a third time, I said you know, I'm a pastor at a church up the road. What kind of a Christian would I be if I overreacted and treated you unkindly or freaked out because of a little accident? That changed the entire tone of the discussion. He started telling me how he volunteers with youth at his church in Texas and we left the scene blessing each other and knowing the damage would be handled. But it gets better! I got the truck repaired and the repair shop said it would be fine as long as I didn't get hit in the back end again. And I said, what would be the odds. Well, I guess they were higher than I thought because less than a month later, I

was sitting at a stop light and again, some young man runs into the back end AND he had no insurance. Again, I was furious, but again God convicted me and by the time I got out of the car, I just asked him to do the right thing and did not unleash the anger I so wanted to. A month later when the car was repaired, which he actually paid,, he met me and said he really appreciated that I didn't yell at him. And started talking to me about his tough life and said he would like to someday visit our church and asked if I would be willing to meet him for lunch sometime. I reached out to him last month and invited him to our Easter service and he texted back immediately thanking me for the invitation. God opened the door, because he directed my interaction in both of these cases. Now I want to be clear. I am not boasting about my behavior because in the flesh, I would have torn into him. But I am boasting of the Holy Spirit working THROUGH me.

- How many people could give testimonies of things you've done?
- Would anyone call you a hypocrite or do they speak well of you? In **Matthew 25:31-46**, Jesus told his followers that whatever they did to the least of His brothers, they did to Him.
- Would people easily recall multiple episodes of how you acted like Christ?

SLIDE FOUR:

Evidence Number Four: Conversion. How have you lived out the Great commission? The judge and jury will consider you a dangerous Christian if you convert others to your faith.

- **Matthew 28:18-20 says** *"And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."*
- How many people have you invited to church?
- How many have you shared the Gospel with? **Mark 16:15** says *"And He said to them, go into all of the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation."*
- How often have you invited someone to an event or visit your home where they might hear about Christ?
- Do you pray for others. Even if you don't know if they are Christians. I have a neighbor who is dealing with prostate cancer named Russ. Now Russ is a tough guy… retired iron worker, Harley Rider, intimidating to even look at. But we became friends when we moved into the neighborhood. Each week on our RR prayer call, we have been praying for Russ for treatment of his cancer. One day last month, he was driving past me and slowed down to talk out his window. He started telling me about his cancer treatment and I just told him that our prayer church team was praying for him every day. This big tough guy reached across the seat and grabbed my hand and started visibly crying. He wouldn't let go and told me how much it meant to him that we were praying for him

- Do people ask you to pray for them or do you ask them if you can pray for them? I had another neighbor who was dying of Liver Cancer. I had no idea of their relationship with the Lord, but one day while visiting them, the Lord convicted me to ask them if I could pray for them. There was no hesitation as his wife, Dale, and I joined hands and prayed for God's mercy and comfort and healing.
- Do people come to you with questions or advice about faith? Sometimes we are nervous because we don't have all of the answers. But that's okay. We know where to get the answers and it's an opportunity to minister to someone in need.
- Do you talk about your faith openly and with conviction, without giving a second thought to the cancel culture we are living in today?
- What would be your legacy? What would others say about you when you go on to eternity. Would they talk about your accomplishments, your material possessions, your career, or your relationship with the Lord?
- Some of you may have heard of Penn and Teller, a comedy team who are openly atheists. Penn made a statement once that he just didn't understand Christians. He said that if he was walking down the street and saw a bus bearing down on an innocent person, he would do everything he could to move that person out of the path of destruction. He then said if Christians really believe what they say they believe, why aren't they doing everything in their power to make sure that others accept Jesus as Lord and Savior so they can join them in eternity

SLIDE FIVE:

Love the Lord Your God With All of your heart

Love your neighbor as yourself

Closing:

As I bring this message to a close, I'm reminded of **Matthew 22:34-40,** "*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

You see, all of this evidence we just reviewed points back to these 2 commands from our Lord and Savior. If you truly are a Christian, your beliefs **AND** your actions will show that you **LOVE** God and you **LOVE** Others.

So is it hard or easy to be a Christian? That depends on whether we walk in the flesh or the spirit. If we walk in the flesh, it isn't just hard… it's IMPOSSIBLE. Remember

Pastor Kerry said there are really TWO ways to get to Heaven. Live a perfect sinless life or Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. In the flesh, we serve our own desires and the Christian life is impossible to achieve. **Philippians 4:13** tells us that *"I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength"*

So we have talked today about the difference between saying you're a Christian and actually being one. And understanding What it means to say you're a Christian. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

David Jeremiah makes the observation that many Christians today are cultural Christians. They have Christian habits, may have had a Christian upbringing, and perhaps even a lot of biblical knowledge. But they do not really know Jesus Christ. He interprets this scripture as Jesus in effect saying, "We did not have a personal relationship. You may have been very busy doing religious things, but you never received Me as your personal Savior." He says that if you belong to Christ, you have been called to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the presence of those who have not yet met Him.

I believe that when we meet Our Lord face to face, we will be judged by the same bodies of evidence we just talked about. Have you ever bought a product that was missing the instructions? It can be a real challenge to navigate through that. The fact is that we have a complete instructional book through the Bible that tells us exactly what it means to be a Christian.

I want to be very clear so no one misunderstands what we're saying here. The only one that was sinless was Jesus Christ. We fall short sometimes. Even Paul said in **Romans 7: 15-17***: I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.* ***16*** *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.* ***17*** *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me*.. But that doesn't change the definition of a Christian which is clear from the Bible and Jesus's Example. The sanctification process is a life long process, as Paul tells us in **Philippians 1:6**: *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Think for a moment that the jury declares you innocent or guilty of being a Christian. If you are innocent and set free because of a lack of evidence, would you feel relief or regret?

If you are declared guilty , would you be willing to die for your faith. Remember the little girl at Columbine who had a gun held to her head and asked if she still believed in Jesus Christ. Would you say yes? Being a Christian means total submission to our Lord and Savior. It means submitting EVERYTHING to him, our finances, our career, our family, our relationships, our life!

Let me pray for us

Father, we take great comfort and peace knowing that Your Word and the example set by Jesus as a sinless man make it crystal clear what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We know that in the flesh, it is impossible to live our lives according to your Word, but we are so grateful that You have sent the Holy Spirit to live in us and when we walk in the Spirit, we can do all things through You. We pray that people will see Jesus in us as we continue to run the race and we look forward to the day when we will see you face to face and hear you say, Well done, by good and faithful servant. And Father, we pray that if there are some with us today who have not yet received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they would take that step today and invite you into their lives. And we pray this in the holy and precious name of Jesus. Amen