

And they'll know we are Christians by our ...

Matthew 7:21-29

May 29, 2005

What makes a true Christian? Sometimes it is hard to tell!

People calling themselves Christian worship in any number of different ways — from very formal to very informal, with classical music to contemporary music to Christian rap to no music at all, celebrating communion at every worship service or every first Sunday or once a quarter or even almost never.

People calling themselves Christian have very different political persuasions, from far right to far left and everything in between, from believing that religion should have nothing to do with politics to believing religion should have everything to do with politics.

Some people calling themselves Christian focus their energies on "winning souls," while other people calling themselves Christian focus their energies on relieving human suffering.

So in the midst of all these differences what does make a true Christian?

Some of you may recognize these comments. They are taken from a weblog entry I published two weeks ago. A weblog is an online diary of reflections and commentary. My weblog is entitled *a believer's journal* and is linked to our church website.

So is this a shameless plug for our church website, www.firstcongucc.org? Yes, it is! I hope you are making good use of our church website and returning to it often. The site is updated and new material is added several times each week. You can access newsletters and calendars and copies of sermons. You can see photos of church events and youth events and learn about our many different mission projects. You can download a summer camp schedule or a VBS registration form or even sign our guestbook.

This website is one of the best means available to us for telling people outside our church family about who we are and what we do. It is so much more effective, so much more comprehensive, so much more accurate than any media ad could be. So point your friends to our church website, especially those who may be looking for a church.

But the website may be very useful too to those of us who are inside this church family. It offers us a useful way of building community and staying connected. We gather each week for worship on Sunday morning, we read about coming events once a week in the *Congregational Tidings*, but the website offers access to the church community any time, all the time!

The weblog in particular is meant to be a place we can meet, to think together and talk together about our faith. You can register and add your comments to an existing entry or even submit a draft entry of your own to be screened for publishing. It is a place to come together, a place for us to meet. It is not face-to-face community and could never replace face-to-face community, but it is real community.

OK, end of plug! Let's get back to the original question: *What does make a true Christian?*

I cannot speak for you, but much of what is heralded in the media as representing the "Christian" point of view, I find rather disturbing and even downright shameful! So this is a question that has some urgency. Too often what is "Christian" is too narrowly defined, leaving out of the picture all sorts of people who call themselves by that name and hold rather different views and values.

I want to suggest a better definition, a broader definition, of what makes a true Christian. But, at the same time, I realize that I have to be careful too not to slap the title onto my own set of prejudices.

So, let's go to the source! How does Jesus identify his true followers, those who are fit for the Kingdom of heaven? They'll know we are Christians by our ...?

What does Jesus say? Look for yourself! Open your Bibles and read! It is the task of every one of us to be faithful readers and interpreters of the word of God. It is not my job to be the designated Bible reader for the church! It is not my job to read this book and pass on to you secondhand what it should mean for you. It is my job to open the pages, to urge you to read carefully, to explore this precious resource with you.

So what does Jesus say? They'll know we are Christians by our right beliefs? Because we believe all the right things and say all the right words?

No! Read verse 21: *Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven ... It's not just about saying the right things. A true Christian is not someone who ascribes to a predefined set of belief statements or who uses the "correct" God-language.*

Then is it this? They'll know we are Christians by our good works? By the great things we accomplish in the name of Jesus?

No! Read verse 22: *When the Judgment Day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!' Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you.'*

Then what is it? What does Jesus say? They'll know we are Christians by our ...? Look! What does Jesus say?

They'll know we are Christians by our obedience: *Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do.* It is like the prayer we pray each Sunday: Thy will be done. Who is a true Christian? According to Jesus: *Anyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them.*

Anyone who hears Jesus' words ... and obeys them! The lesson we have read today from Matthew's gospel comes at the end of a collection of sayings of Jesus that we refer to as *The Sermon on the Mount*. If a true follower of Jesus is one who hears Jesus' words and obeys them, then we have to look no further to know what makes a true Christian. If you want to be a true Christian, you need only listen ... and obey! So listen to a brief selection of some of the things Jesus has to say.

Let your light shine! You are like light for the whole world. Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven ...

Let your light shine. Our witness is meant to be public. We live our faith in the public arena. Following Jesus is not just a private matter, but a matter of public responsibility. And public often means political!

Do not perform your religious duties in public so that people will see what you do ...

This statement seems to contradict the previous statement, but listen carefully. It is praying and giving and fasting that Jesus ask us to do without a show. We live our faith publicly, but we practice it personally. We meet with God in our private places, but we obey God in public places. We do not shine Jesus' light into the world by broadcasting our worship services and letting people watch our religious fervor. We shine Jesus' light into the world with acts of compassion and service and love.

Let your light shine ... Do not perform your religious duties in public ... and,

Do not take revenge ...

Do not take revenge, but love your enemies. And

Do not judge others , for God will judge you in the same way you judge others, and God will apply to you the same rules you apply to others ...

Enough said! A true Christian does not take revenge and does not judge others.

Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, for your heart will always be where your riches are ...

Sometimes you can tell a true Christian by what they don't do, by what they don't seem to care so much about.

Ask ... Seek ... Knock ...

Ask! Seek! Knock!

Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you ... As bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

This is how you can tell a true Christian! One who is humble enough to ask. One who is humble enough to know what they need, to know what they cannot provide for themselves, to know whom to ask. One who is not ashamed to ask!

Let me read for you the rest of the weblog entry I quoted at the beginning of this sermon ...

I believe a true Christian does worship -- in whatever fashion. A true Christian lives out the faith in the real world -- which means faith will have something to say about politics. A true Christian cares about people's bodies and their souls. But the defining characteristic of true Christians -- however they worship, whatever they think about politics, however they choose to show love their neighbors -- the defining characteristic of true Christians is this: knowing for a fact that they are not master of their own lives.

True Christians know that all they are and all they have comes by grace. They know they must look outside themselves for wisdom and direction. They know that personal value is not earned or won, but is bestowed, a gift from God thanks to the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus.

True Christians are humble, recognizing the very real limits of their own wisdom and power. True Christians know they belong to God by God's choice. True Christians spend much of their time saying "Thank you!"

And may I add: True Christians spend much of their time asking and seeking and knocking!

They'll know we are Christians by our obedience. Because we listen to Jesus' words and obey them. Because we let our light shine, but do not make a show of our religion. Because we choose not to take revenge and not judge those who are different from us. Because we value other things more than accumulating wealth. Because we humbly depend on the goodness of God day by day by day.

Because we listen and obey when Jesus says:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as you love yourself ...

Yes ... they'll know we are Christians by our love!