

Beware the “Almost Christian”

John 2:23-25

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I want to talk with you about Christian fellowship. The sad reality is that not all professing believers are worthy of your trust and fellowship. Indeed, some of the worst forms of abuse occur as the result of toxic fellowship. The Bible teaches us to be discerning and cautious regarding with whom we fellowship. This means that more should be required than a simple profession of faith in order for people to gain access to your soul. In our text, Jesus models this use of discernment in determining who is worthy of personal commitment. The setting is the Feast of Passover, the eight-day celebration and commemoration of deliverance from Egypt. Jesus might have exploited the large crowd by soliciting support for His new ministry by gathering names for a mailing list, promising updates as to where and when He would be ministering next, passing out flyers, and selling his latest book on performing signs and wonders.

Instead, we read, “But Jesus did not commit Himself to them.” The Greek word here translated “commit” can also be translated “entrust,” a verb meaning to put into someone’s care; it also means simply, to believe, a form of which is used in verse 23, “many *believed* in His name.” And John uses this word translated in his Gospel as “believed” to represent various degrees of belief, from the first stirrings of belief within the soul leading up to full assurance.¹ Remember, John’s purpose in writing is that his readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing they might have life through his name” (John 20:31). John is writing as an evangelist. And as an evangelist, he wants to ensure his readers come to genuine, full, saving faith, and avoid anything less. And what we discover in this Gospel is many people begin to believe but fall short of saving faith.

And whereas Jesus did not commit himself to those who merely professed belief, today we welcome them into our fellowship as dear saints and fellow heirs of salvation. Have you

¹ Thayer’s Greek-English lexicon for Strong’s word 4100. Available at <https://biblehub.com/greek/4100.htm> [retrieved June 19, 2023].

known people who profess to believe, and yet, you discover they are mean-spirited, toxic people? Have you been in fellowship with people that leave you feeling drained and on the defensive? I have known people who profess Christ but are filled with bitterness. Then there are those who are much more subtle; these appear friendly and cheerful, but something is just not right with them, it is hard to trust they are genuine.

In the case of our text, many of the people at the feast “believed in His name,” that is to say, they held Jesus in high regard because they saw the signs which He did. But they had *not* come to believe in a saving manner. In chapter three, it would appear that even the Sanhedrin, (the seventy elders of Israel) concluded Jesus was “a teacher come from God” and sent Nicodemus to inform Jesus of their conclusion (John 3:1-2). But that did *not* mean they professed Him as Messiah, let alone, the incarnate Son of God. And so, Jesus did not receive Nicodemus as a believer, as one of his sheep, but withheld committing Himself to Nicodemus. Instead, Jesus declared to this leading Pharisee that he must be born of the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. Please mark it down: Jesus knew what was in Nicodemus. For Nicodemus was a religious leader, a “master (teacher) of Israel. And yet, Jesus was not impressed with credentials of men, and instead cut right to the core issue: Nicodemus must be born of the Spirit or not enter the kingdom of God.

The wording of our text speaks to a universal condition, that is, not just the people at the feast, but to Christ’s knowledge of what was in “all men.” He had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man. And in verse 7 of chapter 3, Jesus shifts the conversation away from addressing only Nicodemus and to the plural, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born of again.” The “Ye” for the King James translators conveys the plural as opposed to the singular “you” or “thou.” So Jesus is saying the whole of the Sanhedrin must be born again, it is a necessary requirement for all of Israel, and nothing short of being born of the Spirit will allow anyone to see the kingdom of God. Period. Here’s a question: Are we clear on that point today with so-called “seekers” or visitors to our churches? Do we teach and preach that a person must be born of the Spirit, or do we quickly take any sign of spiritual interest in the things of Christ, or even just the church, to indicate they are genuine Christians?

What is in Man

Now, let's consider what Jesus knew was in man? And here's the answer: A degenerate nature, the leading symptom of which is the *inability to hear the truth*. The people at the feast could applaud signs and wonders, but they could not hear the truth. For evidence of this, we need look no further than John 3:11: "Most assuredly, I say to you, 'We speak what We know, and testify what We have seen; and you do not receive Our witness.'" Jesus continues to speak in the plural and so his words are to the whole of the religious body of Israel. "You all" receive not our witness. He came into the world as Light, and He came to bear witness to the light of heavenly things, things of the Father, and the degenerate condition of man would not allow for them to receive his word. This is the chief issue for the unregenerate: the inability to hear and continue in Christ's teaching.

There is further evidence of fallen man's inability to hear truth in chapter five where Jesus tells the religious authorities,

You search the Scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me. And you will not come to Me, that you might have life . . . Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; there is one that accuses you, even Moses, in whom you trust. For had you believed Moses you would have believed in Me: for he wrote of me. But if you believe not his writings, how will you believe My words? (5:38-47).

Finally, in chapter eight, Jesus tells another group of religious leaders who professed belief in Him that continuing in His word is the test of true discipleship and the means by which one finds freedom from sin. But these newly professed believers protested against that any need for freedom, after all they were good religious Jews: Abraham's seed. The encounter then escalated. At verse 43 we begin to read, with Jesus, speaking:

Why do you not understand My speech? Because *you are not able* to listen to My word. ⁴⁴You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not stand in the truth*, because there is *no truth in him*. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, [nature] for he is a liar and the father of it. ⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, *because you are not of God* (John 8:43-47, emphasis mine).

These people professed belief in Jesus, but could not continue in His word, because they were not of God. Their spiritual parentage was the devil and not God, so they could not hear the truth precisely because it is the truth. Their minds were distorted by their degenerate nature to believe the lie, not the truth. So here we learn this imperative: for anyone to hear the truth and then continue in Christ's teaching requires a change of nature — not a mere professed belief in Jesus; rather, they must be “born of God” and these people were not born of God (See John 1:12-13).

The Almost Christian

So, what is it that Jesus knew was in man that He did not commit Himself to them? Answer: *A degenerate nature, as evidenced by their inability to hear and obey His word.* And that is the problem with the many “Almost Christians” in our churches today as well. Many of these people are like King Agrippa in the book of Acts, who, after listening to Paul's conversion testimony, replied, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). The difference then was that Paul did *not* lower the biblical requirements for conversion to meet Agrippa as would happen today. It is as though we would say today, “Okay, King Agrippa, almost is good enough. Come join our church and we will help you come to a saving faith later.” Now we have millions who have come into the church on some basis other than the hearing of faith, by the Spirit, and here is the sobering truth of our text: *Jesus does not commit Himself to them today, any more than He did those in our text.* Today there are millions of church goers for whom Jesus does not commit himself.

Is it possible to enjoy a religious heritage and be very observant in one's tradition, and yet not have genuine fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ? Absolutely. The Lord Jesus is not obligated to accept our religious overtures. We come to Him on His terms, not our own. After 50 years of well-intended but fallacious “Seeker Sensitive” evangelism, we have succeeded only in filling pews with “Almost Christians.” Amidst the epidemics of society: violence, drugs, immorality, and political and business corruption, we have this loss of truth within the churches—*the salt has lost its savor.* We must acknowledge this tragic reality and detach and contain our commitment for the sake of our own mental and spiritual health, and that of our

families. We must not forget our Lord's warning in Matthew chapter seven, where He declares to very religious people, "I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:23, AV). I quote here from the original King James Version because "iniquity" carries with it the meaning of premeditated sin, planned and determined "lawlessness" (NKJV). Jesus did not reject people for their weaknesses, their occasional stumbling or struggle with sin, He was after all, "the friend of sinners." But He rejected those pretending to be His followers while continuing to act out in premeditated evil

So, what did Jesus do? He remained detached and contained from them. By this I mean he did not open His soul to them, but turned away from them and thus contained his exposure to them. And so must you. Two very important words for every follower of Christ, especially during these perilous times: *detach and contain*. By this I mean you must be discerning and selective as to whom you commit yourself in fellowship. You must be wise as to those to whom you entrust your spiritual health. A man once told me, speaking of his untrustworthy friends, he said they would "Steal your billfold and then help you look for it." Profound betrayal and deceit followed Jesus around under the guise of religious inquiry, even among his own disciples. And this profound betrayal of gospel truth and deception as to what it means to be a Christian remains at work today within Christendom.

Therefore, like Jesus, you must never entrust your minds and souls to people simply because they profess to believe in Jesus. Instead, be biblically informed about what is in fallen man, and be selective in granting relational access. In her book, *Good Boundaries and Goodbyes*, Lysa Terkeurst, offers this point of wisdom, "Love can be unconditional but relational access never should be."² This is a good description of what Jesus models for us here in this text. It was love that sent Him into the world, but love did not mean relational access those who professed belief in Him that day. Something more was necessary.

In chapter ten of this Gospel, we discover those who are His sheep are given to Him by the Father and to these Jesus reveals or commits himself to them: "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:14). They hear His voice, and He knows them, and they follow Him. He gives them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall

² Lysa Terkeurst, *Good Boundaries and Goodbyes* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2022), p.18.

anyone snatch them out of His hand (10:22-30). So, in our times, discerning who to commit yourself to in fellowship is a serious matter for prayer and discernment. We need and want fellowship, and it is God's will that we belong in community, but we must follow our Lord's example as to whom we commit ourselves. The good news is that Bible provides us a lot of helpful direction as to how to recognize those we should mark and avoid. And in the next lesson, we will examine these things more closely. **AMEN.**

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