

Should the sins of past Christians keep people from following Jesus today?  
July 9, 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

We have a really important question to dig into this morning. Let me read it for you.

“I have friends who want nothing to do with Christianity because of things that past Christians have done. They’ll point to things like colonialism and abuse within the church and say ‘why would I want anything to do with that?’ What would you say to someone like that? Should the sins of past Christians keep people from Jesus today?”

Those are great questions and really important ones for us to engage. Sadly, the reality is that people calling themselves Christians have done – AND CONTINUE TO DO – some pretty awful things - abuse, colonialism, racism, the Crusades. The song (paraphrasing Jesus in John 13:35) says ‘They’ll know we are Christians by our love’ and yet Christians have done some pretty unloving things. What do we do with that? How do we help people who are wrestling with that reality to process it? How do we help people to follow Jesus when some of Jesus’ followers have gone off track? Those are important questions to ask.

So what I want to do today is acknowledge that reality. I want to acknowledge that these criticisms are not coming from nowhere. Christians have done some very unchristian things. But I don’t think that they should keep people from knowing Jesus. That would be a tragic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

So I want to explore these things with you and then imagine I’m sitting across the table from somebody wrestling with this question and share with you ‘what would I say to someone in this position.’ I’m hoping that this is a message that you’ll share with friends on YouTube and Facebook and that it helps some people in their walk with God.

So just to organize our thoughts here today, we’re going to address three questions:

1. Have Christians committed sins in the past?
2. Should those sins keep people from Jesus today?
3. What would you say to someone who is put off of Jesus because of the sins of His followers? \*This will be longer because it’s where the rubber hits the road.

So, 1., Have Christians committed sins in the past? Yes.

The person asking the question has pointed a couple out. I know that for a lot of people, colonialism is a big issue; that’s the desire that a lot of Christian nations had in last few centuries to go out and establish new colonies and gain resources for the motherland, often causing great harm to the people who were actually born there. It was often said that ‘We’re just going out to convert the heathen’ but in reality, the priorities were usually ‘gold, greed and God’ with God more of an afterthought than anything. Christians have sinned through the practice of colonialism.

And of course, related to that is the issue of racism. A lot of colonialism was driven by the assumption that white people were just better than other races and that supposedly justified their treatment of other people made in the image of God. So many Christians were slave owners and claimed to have biblical reasons why whites were better than blacks and we’ve all seen how Canadian churches were

complicit in the abuse and stripping away of indigenous identity in residential schools. Christians have sinned through racist actions in the past.

And of course, abuse continues in myriad forms. For years, we've been aware of this issue in the Catholic Church but Protestants are not immune to it either. The Southern Baptist Convention has been in the news lately because of a scathing internal report that showed that for two decades, the denomination's executive committee lied about abuse, covered it up, vilified victims and protected abusers.<sup>i</sup>

And it's not just the Southern Baptists; powerful people in all denominations have used that power for their own benefit. My heart sinks every time I hear about a new scandal surrounding another prominent pastor. Some of you have been through that. It's heartbreaking. This is not the way that it should be. Christians have sinned through abuse.

Now there's a part of me that wants to say 'well, hold on. Some of these things are being done by people who call themselves Christians but really aren't. Colonialism, racism, the Crusades; a lot of that stuff was perpetrated by people who checked off Christian on the census form but had no real interest in faith. They may have been culturally 'Christian' but they didn't know Jesus personally and their ethics showed it.'

So to be fair, we have to acknowledge that. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that people who really ARE Christians have done some equally awful stuff. They may not start off intending to sin against others but power builds up and people give you authority and all of a sudden you think you're above the Law so to speak and you can do whatever you want, whether it reflects Jesus or not. That's not an excuse. It's still wrong. I just want to acknowledge that that's how happens. And it does us no good to deny it or cover it up. The best thing we can do is bring it out into the light.

Which is why I'm glad I got this question. If we're going to faithfully be the church, then we need to acknowledge that yes, there are Christians who have given and are giving Christ a bad name.

So, have Christians committed sins in the past? Yes.

Should those sins keep us from following Jesus today? No.

That would be like going skydiving and refusing to open your parachute because the diving instructor was mean to you and fall-down, black-out drunk. It's like saying 'ok, I'll jump, but I'm not going to use the parachute just to spite you.' Just because the teacher is flawed doesn't mean the object of your faith is. You can trust the parachute. You can trust the Saviour.<sup>ii</sup>

And just like sky-diving, this *is* a life and death situation. I know that there are believers and 'Christians' who have done some really awful things, but, let's be honest, have you ever hurt anyone? Used your influence for your own benefit at the expense of others? I'm going to guess that you have because I certainly have, and theologically speaking, that makes me just as guilty of sin as those past Christians are. All of us have this sin problem, this innate desire to put ourselves before God and neighbour and that separates us from the God who created us and loves us and controls our eternal destiny.

Regardless of what His followers are like, we all need Jesus because He is the only one who can restore us to God and set us up for eternal life. He dealt with my sin and your sin and every sin in every time

and every place on the Cross so that we could be forgiven and made right with God. The only way to the Father is through Him and so it would be an utter tragedy to miss out on Jesus just because of a sinful Christian. Don't let sinful followers keep you from following Jesus because Jesus alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

And it's not just 'follow Jesus to get your salvation ticket punched.' John 10:10, Jesus says that He came to the world to give life and not just life but abundant life. He came to redeem us and enable us to live out the full humanity that God intended for us before we sinned. When we follow Jesus, He calls us into His grand story of redemption, of redeeming all of culture and bringing His goodness into all corners of the world; that's a good way to live. If you want to know what life is really like, life the way a good and perfect and just God intended it, then you need to follow Jesus.

So, should the sins of past Christians keep us from following Jesus today? No, because no matter what His followers are like, we will always need Jesus and Jesus will always be good.

So that brings us to our last question, and this one I'm going to spend a little more time on because I think it's where the rubber hits the road. What would you say to someone who is put off by the past sins of Christians to the point that they want nothing to do with Jesus?

I think I would say three things:

1. I'm sorry.
2. We're trying.
3. Jesus is worth it.

Let me tell you what I mean.

The first thing that I would say is 'I'm sorry.' Christians and people calling themselves Christians have messed up. We've acted in ways that are inconsistent with the character and will of God and that's gotten a lot of people hurt. And it shouldn't be that way. That's not what Jesus stands for; that's not what Jesus is like. We have fallen short in being the people that Jesus intends for us to be.

If you have been hurt by a church leader in the past, or a church generally, or some act undertaken in the name of Jesus, I'm sorry. We have failed to accurately show you what Jesus is like.

I'll never forget, there's this story that I read in a book called *Blue like jazz* in university; it's an autobiography about a Christian guy going to a liberal arts university and he and some other Christians set up a confession booth on campus. But the catch is that they want to confess the sins of past Christians to the other students. The author talks about one conversation he had and he says:

"Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across... I'm sorry for all of that."

I think that we all as Christians need to be able to say that and if you've been hurt by other Christians, please hear us saying it from the bottom of our hearts. If you've put off of Jesus because of Christians, if you've been hurt in some way, I'm sorry. We were wrong.

I would say 'I'm sorry,' but I would also say 'we're trying.' You know that feeling when you know you're not all that you can be but you really want to get there? We're not all that we can be yet but we really want to get there. We really want to accurately reflect Jesus and His character in our lives, so we're trying.

And in the cultural climate that we're living in I think that means four things:

1. Service before power.
2. Grace before judgment.
3. Justice before reputation.
4. Jesus before self.

Just to give you some really tangible ideas, you'll know that we're trying as Christians to be more like Christ when you see us putting:

1. Service before power.
2. Grace before judgment.
3. Justice before reputation.
4. Jesus before self.

Let me just briefly comment on each of those:

1. Service before power. There is real desire in the world to gain power and use that power for personal gain. I know that in movies, that kind of person is the person who learns in the end that it's more important to use your power for others, but in our culture, do we believe that? We make heroes out of powerful people.

And yet to Jesus, service really IS more important than power. I absolutely love John's description of the Passover supper in John 13. Let me read it to you –

3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;

4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. (And He did the work of a servant by washing His disciples' feet).

So much hangs on the 'so' at the beginning of verse 4. Like, read verse 3 again – Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His control – Jesus had ALL the power in the world; He knew He came from God, meaning He was divine and He was going back to God so He was STILL divine – if the 'if this, then that' nature of this sentence worked according to the ways of our world, after the 'so' it should say, 'so Jesus took up His throne and made Himself rich. If He has all the power in the world, then He should logically (by our world's logic), rule the world.

And yet what does it say? He had all the power in the world, SO He used it to serve others in the most humble and practical of ways. It's Philippians 2: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider

equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phi 2:6-7 NIV).

And Jesus actually says after washing His disciples' feet: 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (Joh 13:14-15 NIV).

To use power for your own benefit at the expense of other people is antithetical to the nature of Jesus, so you'll know that we're trying as Christians when you see us putting service before power.

You'll also know that we're trying as Christians when you see us putting grace before judgment.

I think that there's an assumption in the wider world that the church is full of 'holier than thou' Christians and that if you're not a Christian and you go into a church, you're going to have a whole church worth of people looking down their noses at you and judging you. Have you ever been to a church like that?

The problem with that though is that that is totally antithetical to the way of Jesus. I mean, the story of redemption begins with God Himself putting grace before judgment. Romans 5:8:

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... 10 ...when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.<sup>iii</sup>

God didn't wait for us to get right with Him, then love us. He didn't look down His nose at us in judgment. He was so committed to His people that He took steps to make us right with Him and invite us back into relationship with Him. He put grace first and extended that grace to us.

And you see that again and again in the way that Jesus interacted with 'sinners.' The people the religious establishment wanted to write off, Jesus went right up to and invited into relationship with Him. He didn't say 'get your stuff together and then give me a call;' He said 'I'm coming to your house for dinner so you can see what I'm all about.' He came to seek and save **the lost!** That's the definition of grace before judgment – and if we're going to grow in Christlikeness, we need to do that too.

There was an op-ed in USA Today from a World Vision disaster relief director; in it he said: "Christians are called to walk alongside struggling people: an expectant mom facing an unintended pregnancy, a dad recovering from substance use, parents trying to keep their family together. The need is great. Think what a great revival could break out if we focused more on loving God and caring for the most vulnerable."<sup>iv</sup>

He's totally right. You'll know that we're trying as Christians when you see us putting grace before judgment.

Same here: you'll know that we're trying as Christians to be more like Christ when you see us putting justice before reputation. I mean, justice is so central to God's character that it might as well be His middle name. You've got that famous statement in Amos 5; the religious leaders are having the most immaculate services and lavish sacrifices and yet God says:

21 "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.

22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amo 5:21-24 NIV).

So the fact that people are putting their own reputations before justice in order to preserve their church or their influence is entirely wrong-headed. The instinct in a lot of churches is to cover up wrong-doing but what we really need to do is bring that wrong-doing out in the light so that justice can be done.

There's a book called 'A Church called TOV' (godly goodness) that puts it well: "[this kind of] culture calls us to surrender to the truth – to be humble and vulnerable and willing to submit ourselves to the truth even when it's most difficult."<sup>v</sup>

If we're going to grow into the people that God would have us to be then we need to pursue justice at all costs. You'll know that we're trying as Christians to be more like Christ when you see us putting justice before reputation.

And really to sum it all up, I think we can say this: you'll know we're trying when we put Jesus before self.

At the heart of all of these issues – service and power, grace and judgment, justice and reputation – is the question 'who gets first place? Jesus or me? Whose agenda am I pursuing here? Jesus' or my own?'

If we are going to follow Jesus, that means that we deny ourselves, take up our Cross and follow Him – we put HIM first, go where He goes, prioritize what He prioritizes. If we make the effort to honestly put Jesus first in all of life, then we are going to grow to be more and more like Him.

So – what would I say to someone put off by the sins of past Christians? I'd say 'I'm sorry.' I'd say 'we're trying.' And finally I would say 'Jesus is worth it.'

I know that some people have done some really awful things in Jesus' name, but I also need you to know that that's not Jesus. When you see abuse in the church, when you see cover-ups in the church, you are looking at one of those epic fails on that Netflix show '*Nailed it.*' Do you know what I'm talking about?

It's a 'reality TV' show where they give artists and bakers a certain amount of time to replicate this masterpiece/work of art and sometimes it comes out amazing and sometimes it's an utter failure. As Christians, we're meant to reflect the image of God into the world and that means replicating His character and His love and His justice. When Christians fail to do so, what you're seeing is not the perfect original – who Jesus is - but the flawed copy and I don't want you to make a judgment about Jesus based on an epic fail.

Jesus is perfect, Jesus is good. He came to forgive our sins, to reconcile us to God, and restore us to Him. He came to give you abundant life, in this life and the next. He came to give strength to the weak and hope to the hopeless, to make the world better in every way.

Don't let the failures of others, believers or not, keep you from Him. Know that even if His followers fail, Jesus never will.

So, what have we said here?

1. Have Christians sinned in the past? Yes they have. Tragically they have.
2. Should those sins keep people from following Jesus? No, because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.
3. What would I say to someone who is wrestling with this question? I'd say – 'I'm sorry – we've gotten it wrong sometimes' – we're trying – and you'll know it when we're putting service before power, grace before judgment, justice before reputation and Jesus before self – and Jesus is worth it.

Don't allow the sins of others keep you from experiencing the redeeming love of Jesus.

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<sup>i</sup> The report concludes that for almost two decades, the men who ran the SBC's executive committee, which oversees the day-to-day operations of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, lied, engaged in cover-ups, sided with those who were credibly accused of abuse, and vilified victims of abuse. Past presidents of the convention and a former vice president allegedly protected and supported accused abusers.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/southern-baptist-convention-abuse-report/630173/>

<sup>ii</sup> This actually reminds me of a passage of Scripture in the Old Testament – Ezekiel 34. It's literally just like this situation – God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel and says “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel and say to them... woe to those who only take care of themselves... 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally” (Eze 34:4 NIV).

Doesn't that sound like the abuses of church leaders today? You're in it for yourself. You've ruled them harshly and brutally.

And yet, God doesn't say – 'these leaders, they failed, so you might as well forget about me' – no, He says 'since these human leaders didn't care for My people, I MYSELF will come and care for my people.'

15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.

16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice (Eze 34:12-16 NIV).

And remember what Jesus said when He came to earth? I am the Good Shepherd, I've come to lay down my life for the sheep. God came in the person of His Son Jesus to be the shepherd that we need, to rescue us from sin and danger and to lead us into abundance and goodness. Don't let human leaders keep you from Jesus because Jesus Himself came to be the only leader we really need.

<sup>iii</sup> 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Rom 5:8-10 NIV).

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2021/06/29/american-christians-turning-people-off-church-bethany-christian-services/5370555001/>

<sup>v</sup> Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church called TOV*, 141.