

McCabe United Methodist Church
When Christians Get it Wrong: When Christians Are Unchristian (part 1)
Matthew 22:34-40 * Matthew 7:1-5 * John 13:34-35
April 14 & 15, 2012: Pastor Rick Fossum

A single mother was having a hard time raising her four year old son. She did what frustrated people will sometimes do. She joined a church hoping to find some peace and support.

She didn't last long in the church. **"Everyone told me what I was doing wrong as a parent,"** she said, **"but no one bothered to ask if I needed some help."** From this mother's perspective, the church let her down.

If this was an isolated case, it wouldn't matter so much and I wouldn't be talking about her. But, what this young mother said echoed what other young people are saying about today's church according to a three-year study by the Barna Group involving 100s of young adults between the ages of 16 and 29.

In the Barna survey, it was discovered that more young adults are turning away from the Church than ever before.

In their 2007 book, *unChristian*, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, and Gabe Lyons surveyed 100s of young adults from all walks of life, from every corner of this country, from every race. They were to describe people who are Christians, in their opinion. They were given 24 adjectives to choose from. Twelve were positive adjectives such as kindness and honesty and twelve were negative. The top five adjectives this age group selected to describe Christians were all negative: Insensitive, hypocritical and judgmental were among the top five.

Today, we begin a new series based on Adam Hamilton's book *When Christians Get It Wrong*. Hamilton is the lead pastor of one of the fastest growing UM churches in the country. Some of you will have trouble with this series. I'll have trouble preaching it. But, if we hope to welcome young adults into our churches . . . if we hope to help them have a relationship with Jesus Christ, we have to know what they're thinking and why.

The series is for two groups of people. First, it's for young people. It's for young people who remain in the church and it's for young people who are not a part of the church.

And two, this series is for you and me. During this series, we will be challenged to take a long and hard look at our attitudes and actions. We'll be asked the question, **"are we a part of the problem or not?"**

This series is not about changing our beliefs or theologies. That's not the problem. The problem has to do with our attitudes and actions.

Also, we will not be correcting or amending or contradicting the Bible either. In fact, part of the challenge of this series will be for us to *actually* follow the Bible, to take it seriously for a change and do what it tells us to do.

Back to the Barna survey. Like I said, 100s of young people were surveyed, ages 16 to 29. They were asked to describe people who are *Christians* . . . folks like us. These are the results: 87% of all young people surveyed felt that Christians were judgmental. 91% felt that Christians were '*anti-homosexual*'. 85% felt that Christians were hypocritical. 75% felt that Christians were too political. And 70% thought that Christians were insensitive.

Think of a young person you know . . . maybe your own son or daughter or granddaughter or grandson or the teenager next door. What adjectives would they use to describe the Christians they know?

When these same young people were asked about Jesus and what he stood for most of them said "**love.**" I agree. Love is at the core of what Jesus taught. Jesus told his followers that God's will for the human race could be summarized in two commands: love God and love your neighbor. Jesus went on to say that our neighbor is anyone who needs our help. In fact, in a powerful verse from John 13, Jesus said, "**And they will know that we are Christians/disciples by our love.**"

By the way, for Jesus, love was more than just a feeling that happens between people. Love is something we do. Love is something we demonstrate.

One young man who was interviewed described his experience when he was invited to a youth group at a church in his city. It was '*bring a friend day*' for this youth group and he was invited to join them at a local water park. Here's his description of how the day went:

"It didn't start off badly; the rides at the park were fun, and I even enjoyed hanging out with some of them. But during the long ride back to the church, they started talking about people. They discussed who was having sex, who was smoking, who was gay. The more they talked the worse things they said. Many of the people they were talking about were my friends, and they knew it! To make things worse, some of the ones talking loudest were doing the very things they were gossiping about. Finally, they went on to the subject of who was going to hell. It seems that if you don't go to their brand of church, you didn't stand a chance of getting into heaven. That, of course, meant me, and it didn't matter to them at all that I was sitting right there, soaking all this up."

The judgmental, hypocritical and unloving spirit these Christians displayed left this young man determined to leave his church and not come back.

A man had a mouse in his house and his wife wanted him to catch it. He didn't have any cheese laying around and he didn't want to make the effort to go and buy some cheese. So, he cut a picture of some cheese out of a magazine and put the picture in the trap. He thought, **"I'll just fool the mouse."**

When he went to check the trap the next morning, sure enough, he found a big, old, juicy mouse in the trap. There was only one problem. It was a picture of a mouse. Now, what happened is another story.

The point is this: this is how some young adults see Christians. We talk and talk about Jesus and his love, but we seldom show it. We talk and talk about what it means to follow him, but we fall short in the *following* department. We're not fooling young people with our talk.

Adam Hamilton, in his book said, **"some of the most insensitive, critical, and mean-spirited people I've known were persons who claimed to be committed Christians."**

Hamilton was officiating at a funeral for a young man who had taken his own life. The parents were still in shock. In his eulogy, Hamilton talked about God and God's love especially during difficult times like this. As part of the service, he encouraged people to remember the unique and special qualities of this young man.

Following the service, a Christian husband and wife, cornered Hamilton and asked him, **"why didn't you tell them that their son isn't going to heaven?"**

"How do you know the boy isn't going to heaven," Hamilton asked? **"Do you know what was in the boy's heart? Do you know the mind of God?"**

They looked at Hamilton, shook their heads and walked away. I could tell you my own stories about people who claim to be Christian but act in ways that are unchristian. I'm sure you have your own stories to tell.

Jesus was never like that. He had compassion for people . . . even people that others called *sinners* such as tax collectors and prostitutes, adulterers and lepers, poor people and sick people. He didn't judge them or condemn them, he loved them.

The people Jesus got upset with the most were the Pharisees or the religious people. What angered Jesus were the same things that anger today's young people. It was their hypocrisy, their judgmentalism, and their unloving ways. The Bible is full of stories about Jesus challenging the Pharisees. He accuses them of being more interested in following laws and rules than in helping people and loving people.

Ghandi said the same thing when he was talking to E. Stanley Jones, a United Methodist missionary. Ghandi said to Jones, **“I like your Christ, but I don’t like your Christians. They don’t act like Christ.”**

Part of the problem for the Pharisees and part of our problem, and you’ll notice that I said *‘our problem’*, is that it’s always easier for us to see the faults of others than to see our own faults. Jesus put it this way, **“why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but miss the log in your own eye? How can you say, ‘let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye. You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person’s eye.”**

We judge others because they’re different; we condemn people because we don’t like what they’re doing; and then we claim Jesus for our side when we know that Jesus doesn’t choose sides. He just tells us to love God and love our neighbor.

I confess to you today, that I am a recovering Pharisee although I often fall off the wagon. I can be hypocritical, judgmental, unloving and insensitive . . . just like the Pharisees of old. I confess that I am part of the problem when it comes to young people staying away from the church. I confess that I can be so closed-minded in my faith and opinions, that I fail to hear the Spirit of Christ working and moving in me.

What about you and your attitudes and actions, your opinions and platforms? Are you part of the problem or not?

If we’re honest, most of us need to confess. **“Lord, we do struggle with being critical and judgmental, with being experts in finding the faults of others, but overlooking our own. Forgive us and help us do better.”**

This series is a wake-up call for all of us who act more like Pharisees than the one we follow, Jesus Christ. When we Christians are judgmental, hypocritical, insensitive, and mean-spirited, we are acting in unchristian ways.

Let me finish my message today by reading Hamilton’s last paragraph from his chapter one: **“When Christians get it right, they love and give, they work for justice and demonstrate kindness. When Christians get it right they, like Jesus, befriend those who are outside the church rather than condemning them. And when Christians get it right, people are drawn to, rather than repelled by, their faith.”**

This week, I ask you to consider your words and your actions and your attitudes. Consider the kind of message you are sending others especially young people inside the church and outside. Ask yourself, are your words and actions, your attitudes and opinions reflecting the love of Christ for all people or aren’t they?