

Why I am a Christian (3)

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ. It's not just what Jesus said or what Jesus did.

It's the whole person. We are not religious people as if to say we follow a set of rules or observe a set of ceremonies. We are person-centered. Our entire lives are dedicated to Jesus Christ. Listen to what the American beat author Jack Kerouac wrote.

I never thought about Buddha becoming a real part of my life. Jesus is the only one I've ever been interested in. Jesus is the only one I've ever been interested in. For the Christian, Jesus is the beginning, the middle, and the end. Now, if the world in which we live is the first reason I'm a Christian and the Word of God is the second reason, the third and most powerful yet is Jesus Christ. He is the most attractive figure in history. The more we know Him, the more attracted we are to Him as the perfect man. A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ. It was fascination with who Jesus is and what He said and did which drew me in part to becoming a Christian. In an imperfect world filled with imperfect people, Jesus Christ stands alone as someone who can be trusted and in whom our faith can be rewarded. Well, in Mark 7, verse 37, having healed a man both deaf and mute, the crowds were amazed and they said about Jesus, He has done all things well, or more literally, good all things He has done. Can this be said of any other human being? Good all things He has done.

As was famously said by the Scottish author John Buchan, even the best of men are men at best. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But of the Christ who stands head and shoulders above all others, it is said He has done all things well. No wonder Jack Kerouac could say of him, Jesus is the only one I've ever been interested in.

Now, we could talk about the life of Jesus all week and all year. It would be an honorable legacy if it could be said of any of us. All she ever talked about was Jesus Christ.

[2 : 5 9] But let me suggest the following three aspects of Jesus, which I have found particularly attractive and which drew me to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. First, His perfect life. Second, His passionate love. And third, His painful death.

You may be drawn by the logical coherence of Christianity, but for many, if not most Christians, it is Jesus Christ, the man who drew them first.

First of all then, the perfect life of Jesus. The perfect life of Jesus. We live in a world of smoke and mirrors. We always have. It's now just more obvious than it's ever been before.

Daily, prominent figures in world society are proved to be other than what they really are. During the early 1990s, the former British Prime Minister, John Major, launched a nationwide campaign called Back to Basics, where he held up marriage as the bedrock of society.

Little did we know at the very same time, he was conducting an affair with Edwina Currie, one of his fellow cabinet members. The deeper we look into the lives of the rich and the famous, the more hypocrisy, greed, and deceit we discover.

[4 : 35] But we don't need to look upwards to see such imperfection. We see it all around us. And most serious of all, we see it within us. Perhaps we excuse ourselves by saying, well, no one's perfect. But the truth is, there was only one who was absolutely perfect in every way, in thought, word, and deed, in the good things he did, and the sinful things he did not do.

And that man was Jesus Christ, truly the only perfect man to ever have lived. At his trial, Pilate brought Jesus out to the crowds, wearing a purple robe and a crown of thorns, and said, behold the man, echo homo, behold the man.

Behold him indeed. Study him for yourself, and you'll find that he and he alone is perfect. Now, although the whole Bible is about Jesus, his biographies, if they can call them that, are the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

These are firsthand accounts of his perfect life from beginning to end. It is there we find that what the crowds said of him is true. Good all things he has done. He has done all things well. And we could go through episode after episode in his life and point to his perfection.

But before we do that, let me ask, can anyone point to something he did or said that was wrong, which went against God's law? Can anyone point to an event where he did not love God and did not love his neighbor? Can anyone accuse him of wrongdoing, either in his public or private life? The deeper we look into the lives of the rich and famous, and the deeper we look into our own lives, the more hypocrisy we discover. But the deeper we look into the life of Jesus, the more sincerity, truth, and love we discover. Take, for example, Jesus teaching in Matthew 5 through 7, his Sermon on the Mount. It's been said about the famous Beatitudes of Matthew 5 that it's as if Jesus was sitting for the portrait he was painting with words. No one was ever as poor in spirit as Jesus. No one such a man of sorrows as he. No one ever so meek. No one who ever hungered and thirsted after righteousness as he did. No one ever as merciful. No one ever as pure in heart. No one who was a peacemaker like he was, and no one who was as persecuted as him. These weren't words he spoke as much as virtues he exemplified. And then in Matthew 6, Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy in all its forms. He talks of how hypocrites fast and pray and give. They do so not out of sincere motives, but in order to win the praise of others. They're very careful to be seen. How different Jesus was. His devotion to God was utterly sincere. It was his practice to spend hours by himself praying to his Father. He wasn't interested in the praise of others, but only in the pleasure of God. And then in Matthew 7, Jesus talks about how we are to relate to God as Father when we pray. For Jesus, prayer is asking and seeking and knocking.

[8 : 25] For him, prayer wasn't ceremonial. It was relational. As we go through the account of Jesus in the Gospels, we're struck by the emotional depth and intimacy and simplicity of his prayers. For him, prayer was about speaking to his Father. How perfect the life of Jesus. It was a life of consistency and righteousness and righteousness and love. There was never any hypocrisy in his words or actions.

As his disciple Peter would later say of him, as his disciple Peter would later say of him, He was a lamb without blemish or spot. They say that no one is perfect, but the more we look at Jesus of Nazareth, the more we know that he was. He was. The deeper we look into Jesus' life, the more love, generosity, and truth we discover. The perfect life of Jesus drew me to him. Perhaps it will you also.

Secondly, we have the passionate love of Jesus. The passionate love of Jesus. The Jesus we meet with in the Gospels is a real man. He's not a mythical hero. He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

And what strikes us about him is his seemingly endless capacity for love. The greatest man who ever lived had the greatest capacity for self-giving, for self-sacrifice, and for selfless love. Time and again he encounters people who by any standards are unlovable, but he loves them. The outcast, the stranger, the unclean, he loves them.

Our children sing about it. Jesus' love is very wonderful. And the deepest of all theological truths is found in the words, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

[10 : 41] When we think about Jesus, it is right for us to automatically think love. For in all the Gospels, we hear him describing love, and we see him living love. The words of the old hymn spring to mind, living he loved me. There are so many instances of his love in the Gospels, but let me focus on just one or two. In Mark chapter 10, a very rich young man comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus says to him, go sell all you have and give to the poor.

The young man left Jesus because he was unwilling to give away his possessions. And yet we read in Mark 10, 21, these wonderful words, Jesus, and Jesus looking at him, loved him. Even though he knew that this rich young man loved his money more than God and had made an idol of his wealth, Jesus loved him. You know, it's easy to love those who love you, but to love those who don't love you, that's a different kind of love, love that doesn't come natural to any of us. Jesus spoke of loving his enemies, but in this instance in Mark 10, he puts it into practice. He loves a rich young man who doesn't love him, a man who turns his back on Jesus and walks away. This is love, love that came down from heaven, and his name was Jesus Christ. And then in Mark chapter 1, Jesus encounters a leper who, falling before him, cries out, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

In the society of the day, lepers were the lowest of the low. Their bodies were covered with weeping sores, and their appearance was enough to horrify a normal person. During the COVID pandemic, we stayed well clear of someone who was coughing, and in Jesus' day, people kept well clear of lepers.

This leper hadn't experienced any kind of human kindness for years. He was untouchable. But we read that when Jesus saw him, he was moved with pity. His inner organs shook with compassion, with a gut-wrenching love. And then we read, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said, I am willing, be clean. Wouldn't you just have loved to have looked into Jesus' eyes, the eyes of that leper? Jesus did the most beautiful thing. He loved the unlovable.

He touched the untouchable. He reached out to the lonely. See the passionate love of Jesus, so boundless, unmeasured, so free. And then in John chapter 10, Jesus is fast approaching the days of his own death.

[14 : 04] And a messenger comes to him saying that his friend Lazarus is very sick. When Jesus reaches Lazarus' house, Lazarus' sisters inform him that Lazarus had died. Jesus, stricken with grief, asks to see the grave. And when he reaches the grave, we read, Jesus wept. John 10, 35 is the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus wept. And yet it is one of the most powerful.

The perfect man stands over a grave, and he's weeping real tears. And those watching on say to each other, see how he loved him. Those tears were evidence of his passionate love for Lazarus.

This wasn't the first, nor would it be the last time Jesus wept. But it's here at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. He sheds real tears. And then comes one of Jesus' greatest ever miracles.

He brings Lazarus back from the dead with the immortal words, Lazarus, come forth. The miracles of Jesus are so filled with passion and purpose, but it's the love that's behind them which is the real apologetic. Jesus reaches out to the grieving to bring them comfort, not from a therapist's chair, but from the passionate love of a fellow sufferer.

How great his love to be so involved with our lives and all the ups and downs. In love, how fragile he makes himself. See how he loved him, they said.

[15 : 48] Now, we could go on recounting story after story, but let me give you this one last example. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus was with his disciples in an upper room. The evening began in the most surprising fashion. Jesus took off his outer garments, and he filled the basin with water, and he wrapped a towel around his waist, and he washed his disciples' feet. He took the place of a slave.

He did the most menial of tasks. It was prompted not by duty, but by love. For in John 13, 1, we read, having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the end.

Among those whose feet he washed was Peter, the Peter who would so soon deny his Lord three times. Among them was Judas Iscariot, the very same who would betray him to the Romans.

All the disciples would abandon him in his hour of need, and he knew it, and yet here he is, and he's washing the feet. What kind of love is it that would so willingly humiliate itself to wash the feet of such an undeserving group of false friends? It's the kind of love that doesn't come natural to us, the kind only God could show and does show to us every day. It's that love that lowers itself and abases itself before us. How passionate the love of Jesus. The Gospels present us with a three-dimensional real man with real emotions, doing real things, and shedding real tears. The Apostle Paul would later say of him, he was the Son of God who loved me. For thousands of years, Christians have spoken of the love of Jesus as being preeminent, and the more we read of him, the more we learn of him, the more loving he becomes to us. The passionate love of Jesus for those in trouble, for those who reject him, for those who grieve, and for those who treat him so lightly, it drew me to him. Perhaps it will draw you also.

The passionate love of Jesus. Third and finally, the painful death of Jesus. The painful death of Jesus.

[18 : 28] There's so many aspects of the life of Jesus which draw us to him, how every aspect of his life was predicted in the Old Testament before any of it happened, his miraculous conception, the miracles he performed, the words of his mouth, but of all the remaining aspects of Jesus' life which draw us to him, his death stands tall. One of the reasons many of us are Christians today, followers of Christ, is because of how and especially why he died. It would seem almost ridiculous to talk of the death of Jesus at all. If we believe the Bible is the Word of God, it's true in all it says, then we are left wondering how it's possible that Jesus could ever have died. The Apostle John tells us, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Jesus who died on the cross was God made flesh.

How can God die? It is an unspeakable mystery. But what is perhaps less mysterious are the events that led to his death. Men jealous for power and control felt threatened by him. His perfection highlighted their imperfection and they hated him. They hated him to the extent that they arrested him, tortured him, tortured him, and crucified him. It's something we see every day in our world with the exception that no one was ever as perfect as Jesus and never was the judgment so manifestly unjust.

Jesus was the victim of the sinfulness and political power plays of men and the man who loved so perfectly and so passionately paid the price on the cross. They tortured him. They stripped him and beat him.

They struck him with their fists and with clubs. They mocked him. They forced a crown of thorns into his head and they mercilessly whipped him until rivers of blood flowed down his back. But all the time, Jesus was silent, Jesus was silent. He didn't curse them. He didn't cry out for vengeance. He took it like a lamb going to the slaughter. When they dragged him before the Roman authorities, Jesus stood silently.

Behold the man, the king of the Jews, standing humiliated before the crowds as they called out, crucify him. The Roman proconsul Pontius Pilate could find no basis for a charge against Jesus. And yet, for political reasons, they condemned him to death. Having tortured him more, they forced him to carry the cross up the Via Dolorosa to Mount Calvary. And there they hammered nails into his hands and feet and they crucified him. And all the time, Jesus was so silent.

[21 : 34] For those hours when Jesus hung on the cross, his thoughts weren't for himself. His thoughts were for us. He spoke compassionately to one of the thieves being crucified beside him. He pled for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him. Even then, at the pinnacle of his suffering and disgrace, Jesus didn't think of himself. He thought of us. And at the very end, when he hung his head and he died, he prayed, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Even then, his trust in God was unshakable.

The Roman centurion, looking on, had seen thousands of crucifixions in his time. But of this one, he said, surely this man was the Son of God.

How could such an injustice have taken place? We know the answer all too well. The crazy demand for power will drive men to destroy anyone who gets in their way. But with what love and purpose Jesus died, how patiently he bore his sufferings, how lovingly he spoke from the cross, dying takes up all a person's time. And yet, even then, in pain none of us can imagine, Jesus thinks not of himself, but he thinks of us. Did anyone die in the manner he did? Surely in life, of all things, he did well.

In death, he did things even better. From 2,000 years' distance, as we stand at the foot of the cross, watching as Jesus dies, our hearts are filled with admiration and with love for him. Our admiration becomes only more acute when we realize that it wasn't for his unrighteousness and sin he was dying, but for ours. He was freely giving himself to the torment of the cross for our imperfections and our lovelessness.

Jesus Christ, the perfect man, died for us. The real Jesus really died for us, shedding his precious blood in glorious rivers, flowing down through the preaching of the Word until today, when the benefits of his life and death are offered to us all. Of none of us can it ever be said, he has done all things well. For we all know that there are many things that we have done badly. Our consciences cry out against us. But the Bible points us to the Jesus who cried out on the cross to silence our guilt and to take away our shame. A Christian is a follower of this Jesus. Our faith is entirely person-centered.

[24 : 48] Faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus. That is our reasonable response to all Jesus is dead and said.

He calls us to believe in him, to trust in him, to follow him, to become his disciple. Is this all really so naive and foolish on our part?

But when we assess Jesus' perfect life, his passionate love and his painful death, it's not so foolish after all. In fact, it is the path of true wisdom.

No wonder then that Jack Kerouac could say, Jesus is the only one I've ever been interested in. It all begins by adding your voice to the crowd who witnessed Jesus' healing of this deaf and mute man in Mark 7. The crowd who were astonished by Jesus and said of him, he has done all things well. Can you say that today? Will you say that of Jesus today?

Will you place your faith and trust in him? Will you become his follower? Will you become a Christian? Amen.