

The Integrity Problem

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[0:00] My name is David Short. I work at St. John's. I'd like to just welcome myself back again. I've been away for a little while and welcome to all of you as well.

You'd find it helpful if you keep James open at chapter 4. We'll get to that in about 20 minutes. I hope. Barton Prieb was a pastor here in Vancouver for 15 years until he moved over to the island. And two years ago, at the end of his time here, he published a book called *The Problem with Christianity*. He said that almost every time he was in conversation with people who didn't belong to a church here in Vancouver, someone would say, the problem with Christianity is... And then they would put in place either something that they were genuinely struggling with that was a real barrier to them or some slogan or mantra that they had learned they don't really want to seriously engage with Jesus.

This has been my experience as well and I think it's probably your experience as well. You know, you're in a context and people... It's worse for me, minister.

[1:14] And people find out what I do and that kills the conversation. So I always try and say something witty like I'm in futures or, you know, and they ask about that.

I've recently been saying to people in my travels that there's a church in Vancouver that pays me to tell people how wonderful Jesus is. And I'm hoping that they will say, oh, how do you do that? But they don't. They say, that's nice. So I've got to work on that. But you know what it's like in conversation. People say, the problem with Christianity is I'm a scientific person. It's all just faith. Or the problem with Christianity is that God hates gays. Or the problem with Christianity is you're all arrogant because you say there's only one way to God. Or the problem with Christianity, et cetera, et cetera. And during the spring term, we had four nights together where we thought a little bit more about how to share our faith and how to connect with others.

[2:16] And as we looked at some of these questions, it's important to acknowledge that they are unsettling for us as well. Some of us are struggling with uncertainty about these things.

And so we decided to have this little summerish series called *The Problem of Christianity*, which we stole from Prieb's book. And today is the fourth in the series.

It's called *The Integrity Problem*. I see in the bulletin it's got David Short, *The Integrity Problem*. I'll talk to you about that later.

Now, my experience of this is that it comes up in two ways, two different ways today in conversation. The first is people say Christians are hypocrites.

You're all hypocrites. I could never be a Christian. This is an older challenge. And it often comes from people who've been deeply wounded and hurt by Christians.

[3:15] There's sometimes some real suffering and difficulty behind this. You know the story of Mahatma Gandhi in India, who was intrigued by the person of Jesus Christ. He had read the Sermon on the Mount, thought that was brilliant.

And so he decided to visit a Christian church in Calcutta. And he was blocked from entry at the door. The ushers told him, no, this church is only for high caste Indians.

You know, the caste system in India. And Gandhi was in the second lowest caste. It's only for high caste Indians and for whites.

And they turned him away. And he later wrote, I'd be a Christian if it weren't for the Christians. What do you say when someone says Christians are hypocrites?

The second challenge comes this way. It's more modern. It's a little more sophisticated. It is this, religion causes wars and violence. I could never be a Christian. You heard that one?

[4 : 15] Christopher Hitchens famously in his God is not great. He says, religion kills. From Belfast to Belgrade. From Beirut to Bombay. From Bethlehem to Baghdad.

From the Crusades to 9-11 to the Inquisition. He says, religion is a poison. It's the root of all evils. So what do you say when someone says religion causes war?

And what I'd like to do this morning with you is just take a closer look at both those questions, what we might say to them, and then have a look at what God says about them. So that's when we'll look at the book of James.

So when we hit the book of James, you know we're on the downhill slide there. So the first point is this. What do we say when people say Christians are hypocrites? I think we want to say, yes, but. And the fact is that many are opposed to Christianity not because of sincere intellectual doubts, but because they've been hurt by Christians and churches. You know, if the majority of Christians that a person knows are just lovely, generous, thoughtful, and devout people, Christianity is just going to seem more plausible.

[5 : 31] But if the Christians they know are nasty, mean-spirited, self-righteous, and arrogant, the whole Christian faith is not going to seem so plausible. And I think we have to say, yes, Christians are hypocrites.

The evidence is in, and it's pretty overwhelming. All of us are self-righteous from time to time. We all know what it is to put on the mask and pretend to be something. In my very first congregational meeting after I was ordained, the vestry meeting, it ended in a fight between the rector's warden and the organist.

I'm not telling a lie, am I, Bron? Who were grabbing each other and shoving each other and swearing at each other over the family service. That was my first, that was my first vestry meeting. I'd been in plenty of political things at university where there were lies and dirty tactics. I'd never seen this in a Christian church before. Do you know in that church, a group from the congregation so disliked the direction the rector was setting that I was heading in, that both of us received letters of death threats from people in the congregation signed from God.

I can laugh about it now, but I tell you. We have friends in a church in Seattle who were subject to systematic bullying by the senior pastor.

[7 : 01] We read about sex scandals and the abuse of spiritual power regularly. And the thing about this kind of hypocrisy is that it can damage those who are tender in their faith or who are coming to faith.

Last month's Atlantic magazine, the first letter to the editor was from a college student. Let me read it, read some of it. He said, I grew up in an evangelical Christian household.

I am a recent ex-evangelical. And the reason, during the 2016 campaign, the president of mine university, it was supposed to be a Christian university, endorsed a man who lived in complete and unapologetic opposition to all the things I've been taught to value.

He's talking about Trump, of course. I questioned my religion, I questioned my faith, and I questioned my God. And he says, I'm one of the victims. More recently, in the New York Times, there was a piece carried by a guy who'd left the Christian faith.

He'd gone to a Christian college which had a huge reputation. He found that college dogmatic, combative, exploitative. And he said, the idea popped into my mind as I experienced this, that maybe the Bible's wrong.

[8 : 08] So I think we need to say yes. We need to acknowledge there's hypocrisy in the church. And where we see hypocrisy in ourselves, we need to repent of it. But we need to say but.

And I think there are three buts we need to say on this issue. And the first one is this. This is just very simple. It's that there's a great difference between failure and hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is not just falling short of a standard. Hypocrisy is covering up, deliberately covering up that you're falling short of a standard. Hypocrisy is when you claim something about yourself and knowingly and intentionally do something else.

So this week at Bible camp, I saw King Nebuchadnezzar, one of the kings in Daniel. Terrific acting. He spoke with a broad Scottish accent. He looked like Sean Connery.

Made jokes about Saskatchewan. It was fabulous. And he wore clothes that I understand he wore at Value Village. He was acting. And a hypocrite is someone who wears a mask.

[9 : 15] He's deliberately or she's deliberately intending to play someone else. So a Christian hypocrite is not a Christian who fails to follow, fails to live up to the standard. But it's someone who

knows they should turn the other cheek.

But when they go to work on Monday, they take the opportunity for payback and revenge.

Hypocrisy is a preacher calling for sexual purity and having an affair. Hypocrisy is someone who says, oh, I believe in the grace of God, but never give generously.

And the book of James, we're not going to look at it yet. The book of James says that sort of faith is dead. It's useless. Not really faith. Be doers of the word, not hearers, deceiving yourselves because you're not deceiving anyone else.

And the terrible reality is that God has dangerously vested his reputation in his people. And it's not our failures that bring him into disrepute.

It is hypocrisy. If it was our failures that brought him into disrepute, we might as well go home. We might as well give it up now, right? Right? Because isn't it part of being a Christian?

[10:24] We sin all the time. We ask God for forgiveness. But hypocrisy is different. That's the first but. The second but is this, that the fiercest critique of hypocrisy was Jesus himself.

Utterly scathing to those who tried to cover their pride and their love of power and prestige behind religion.

He's the harshest. He reserves his harshest words against self-righteousness. He says to the religious leaders, you pretend to be clean on the outside, but inside your souls are rotting, decaying cadavers.

And what that means is that whenever Christians are hypocrites, the solution is not to stop being Christian. It's to be more Christian and be more like Jesus Christ.

And the third but is this. And the third but is this. This is an important but. It is the nature of Christianity. Christianity is a rescue religion. And I think if you're talking to someone who has this view of Christians, this is always an opportunity to speak about the nature of Christianity as a rescue religion.

[11:31] And we always have illustrations that are current. I mean, these young boys, some of whom have been rescued this morning in the Thai cave, wonderfully rescued, they can't rescue themselves.

It's a great picture of the Christian faith. And here's the thing. We are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. You're not saved by your goodness. We're not saved by our moral deeds.

And our faith is not based on the goodness of other Christians, but on the perfect life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not clean up your act and God will accept you.

It's about the fact that God has accepted you and rescued you. And so you ought to be cleaning up your act. And every Christian knows what it is to be flawed and sinful. And if you're thinking about joining St. John's, we will disappoint you.

We have to give each other the benefit of the doubt. Christians believe this lovely doctrine called total depravity. It's such a freedom believing that. It just means we're all flawed. We're all immature.

[12:35] We're all broken. We've all got a long way to go. Which does not excuse Christian hypocrisy. But it says that salvation is based on something outside ourselves, on Jesus Christ.

And the way that we receive that is by recognizing our need, turning away from our self-righteousness and receiving the gift of his righteousness. And what that means if you're in conversation with someone is that you should join us because there's room for one more hypocrite. So to the question of hypocrisy, I think we say yes, but. What about the second, religion causes wars?

I think we have to say to this, no, but. This is a slogan that has been popularized over the last 10 years by the so-called new atheists, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

Who, incidentally, they refer to themselves as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. It shows they haven't read the book of Revelation because the four horsemen of the apocalypse are responsible for disease and misery and death and they fail in the end.

[13:42] So Richard Dawkins wrote this, religion causes wars by generating certainty. He says it's the very nature of religion to be dangerous.

It breeds irrational and dogmatic certainty and intolerance. And he says this is specifically true of Christianity with the Crusades, the Inquisition, Christian nations institutionalizing oppression and imperialism.

He says the world would be good if we just got rid of religion altogether. It's a simple argument and it's become a bit of a cultural mantra. And it comes in different ways today.

I heard it recently in this way. I think it might have been on television. Most wars in history were started by religion. What do we say to this? I think we just say kindly and sincerely.

We have to say no. That's not true. But we say no because it's not just simplistic. It's historically false. Let me give you three reasons why we should say no.

[14:46] First are the historical facts. Did you know that there is such a thing as the Encyclopedia of Wars? I made a discovery this week. Three volumes published in 2004.

And it covers all the wars going as far back as 8,000 BC to 2003 AD. And it charts 1,763 wars of which less than 7% have any form of religious connection or cause.

And of those killed in wars, less than 2%. And that includes every major religion in the world. Now I think we would say as followers of Jesus that even one religious war is too many.

One person dying because of religious war is far too many. However, historically, it is simply false to say that religion causes wars or most wars are caused by religion.

Point one. The second reason I would say no is I think there's an elephant in the atheist's room. There's only three specifically atheistic regimes in history.

[15:56] Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, Pol Pot in Cambodia, which rejected all religion whatsoever, but are responsible for the deaths of people in astonishing numbers.

Let me give you some figures. So people point to the Spanish Inquisition, where people were tortured for heresy and executed. And it's true, even though it's exaggerated.

The high estimate of the death toll of the Spanish Inquisition over 350 years is between 5,000 and 6,000 people. Again, one person would be too many for the cause of Christ.

The first secular state was in the French Revolution, and they killed 17,000 people by the guillotine in nine months. Stalin's Russia killed 20 million, they estimate, over 30 years.

That is double the entire Spanish Inquisition over 350 years, double that toll each week. Under Mao, the death toll is, nobody knows, 45 to 75 million.

[17:04] And the numbers are mind-numbing. However, it's simply to point out that the most violent, imperialistic and murderous regimes have not been religious, they've been atheistic.

And that doesn't mean atheism causes wars. But it does mean that blaming violence on war, on religion, is just false.

And the third reason we would say no is this. I think only Christianity has the resources to turn back violence and deal with oppressions because of Jesus. Let me say to you this way.

When Christians act violently or oppress others, we are deliberately disobeying what Jesus said. Those words we heard this morning, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.

Every single person in the world has capacity for love and hatred. When Christians love, we're doing it according to the will of God. When we hate, we defy God. But there's nothing in the atheist worldview, there's no resources in the atheist worldview to inspire love and compassion.

[18:09] It's completely irrational to help the weak or to be compassionate to the poor and needy. But when you look at the heart of the Christian faith, there's Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dying on the cross, praying for God to forgive those who are killing him.

So I think we just have to say no. We just say no. Religion doesn't cause war. However, there is a but. And the but is this, that the name of Jesus Christ has been used to justify violence.

It was used by the perpetrators of the Inquisition and it was used by some who prosecuted the Crusades. Let me make a comment about this. The Crusades, Crusade is a modern word used to describe a series of wars, five wars between the middle of the 11th century and the middle of the 13th century.

It was originally to protect persecuted Christians in the Holy Land from the cruelty that they were suffering. However, despite the fact that there were many godly Christians who went on those Crusades, you know, who created hospitals and gave their lives to serve the poor and the diseased, and despite the fact that there is absolutely no link between the Crusades and Islamic extremism today, there is still no excuse for the brutality and bloodshed, for the killing of Jews and the killing of Muslims by our ancestors in the faith.

And I think we're rightly ashamed that these things were done in the name of Christ under the banner of the cross. That's what Crusade means. So to the question, are Christians hypocrites?

[19 : 57] Christians are hypocrites. I think we want to say yes, but. And to those who say religion causes war, I think we want to say no, but. And when we turn to the Bible, what we find is all this is turned on its head.

We find that although we've got questions for God, what's infinitely more important is the fact that God has got questions for us. And the issue from God's point of view is not the problem with Christianity, it's the problem with all humanity.

And he says that the source of violence and war is not out there, is not some one group cause. It's in here. It's in my heart. Look at James chapter 4 verse 1.

Literally it reads, what causes wars and what causes fights among you? And the simple answer in verses 1 to 10 is pride.

Our God complex. In fact, behind hypocrisy as well as behind violence and war is the idolatry of the self.

[21 : 06] This is how it works. I want something bad enough. And if you get in my way, I'm going to kill you. That's how it works. See, what causes wars and fights among you?

Is it not this, that your passions, your pleasures are at war within you? You desire, you do not have, so you murder. You covet, you cannot obtain, so you fight and you quarrel.

Beautiful. Beautiful. James uncovers our pride step by step. He says, it begins first with our desires. What's going on in my heart? My priority of my pleasure. Number two. Okay. Number two.

My desire is frustrated. You have what I want. You are in my way. And it can be a good desire for acceptance or for success or to be loved.

But it becomes more important. Those desires in my heart are more important than you are. And if you're in competition, and if God stands in the way, I'm going to have to kill him too.

[22 : 14] That's exactly what happened when God sent his son. It's very interesting. When you look at the life of Jesus, what does he do with his power? What does he do? He gives it away. He takes his power and he uses it for other people.

Now, Bron and I have just come back from Israel. We had the privilege of spending some days on our own in Galilee. And we don't like bus tours. So we went around to some of these little towns on our own.

And most of the towns in Galilee, in the New Testament, completely rejected Jesus. And a number of them tried to kill him. Same for us.

If we stick with our hypocrisy or hatred or our violence, we've got to kill Jesus. But we are the ones who Jesus came for.

He came for the hypocrites. He came for the self-righteous. He came for those who are violent. He came for the victims as well. And the Bible draws a direct connection between the cross of Jesus Christ and true peace.

[23 : 16] Shalom peace. It says, And you think about it.

In the cross of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself, the son of God, took in human violence, was the victim of injustice. And he does that with great power to break the bonds of death and violence and to establish peace.

Peace with God and peace with each other. And the Bible promises that there is going to come a day when God will ultimately stop war and violence. The prophet Isaiah says this in the second chapter.

He shall judge between the nations. He shall decide disputes for many people. He'll decide all the disputes. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore. The day is coming, says the Bible, when Christ will return. And every wrong will be judged.

[24 : 28] Every wrong will be put right. Every war, every murder, every dispute will be decided. Between peoples, Serbs, Croats.

Hutu, Tutsi. Russian, Chechen. Jew, Palestinian. And the strife will be replaced by shalom, which is more than just peace.

It's more than the absence of war. It's enjoying God and enjoying the place he's put us and enjoying each other and enjoying ourselves. And what that means is that the true conflict we are engaged in is not with each other or with competing people.

The true conflict is a spiritual conflict. Because, you see, the thing about pride and the thing about hypocrisy is you can't contain it. You can't control it.

You can't manage it. And you can't master it. What we need is a power greater than ourselves to come into our lives and to overturn it and then to start underneath, to uproot it.

[25 : 29] And that's the power of grace. And James tells us that this is the remedy for hypocrisy and war. Look at this, verse 6, chapter 4.

But he gives more grace. I almost feel like that's the key line in the book of James. God gives more grace. More, more, more. You need grace?

You need help? God gives more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. He's only giving it to one group of people. So how do we humble ourselves?

Verse 7. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil. That's the enemy and he will flee from you. How do we do that? Number, verse 8. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Isn't that astonishing? That the God who made the world, the God who loves us, the God who's used his power to die on the cross for us. He wants us to draw near to him first because he has drawn near to us.

[26 : 28] And when we do that, he promises that with all good, with all glory, with all peace, with all longing, he will draw near to us.

And that is the only thing that can undermine pride and violence and hypocrisy. We read in a psalm this morning, taste and see that the Lord is good.

I thought that's a perfect thing for me to finish with. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Draw near to God. He will draw near to you. Let's do that together as we kneel and pray.