

Reason to Believe: Aren't Christians Guilty of Terrible Injustice?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

June 28, 2020- Livestream Service

Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Last week you may remember that I referenced Christopher Hitchens' book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. I mentioned how that book has two parts. The first 3 quarters of that book detail some of the terrible things done in the name of God throughout history. The last quarter of the book is an argument that humans would be more moral without religious belief. We'd all be kinder and gentler without God. Last week's sermon pushed against the second part of Hitchens' book: the idea that humans would be more moral without God. I argued that while atheists are often nice people, their nice-ness is borrowed. The foundation of atheism, the soil of atheism doesn't have the nutrients to sustain goodness and kindness. What I didn't really address was the first part of Hitchens argument. What about all the terrible things Christians have done over the years? What about all the violence, the hypocrisy, the prejudice, the cruelty perpetuated by members of Christ's church? This needs to be addressed because it is a major obstacle to belief. I would say that along with the problem of suffering (which we will address in a later sermon) this is one of the most common reasons people reject Christian faith. "Don't tell me about Jesus because I've seen what you Christians do!"

This problem has two forms. There are the large scale atrocities. It is way too easy to go through the history books and find example after example of Christians behaving badly on a large scale. Sometimes we kill each other. In Northern Ireland during the troubles, Protestants and Catholics took turns killing each other, setting bombs, planning midnight assassinations. The troubles were nothing compared to what happened in Europe in the middle of the last millennium when Catholics and Protestants killed each other in droves. In the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, something like 10,000 protestant Huguenots were slaughtered in the streets of Paris. All of it done with religious justification.

Sometimes our bad behavior aims at outsiders. The anti-Semitism in Europe led to pogroms that wiped out villages full of Jews and paved the way for the holocaust. The massacre of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian Christians in Srebrenica. Dutch reformed theologians in South Africa justifying Apartheid by twisting Bible texts. It's way too easy to find stories of Christians doing things that make you cringe.

But often it's not the atrocities; often it's the small stuff that keeps people from faith. While we were growing up, some Christian person hurt us. Somewhere along the way, this community that was supposed to be about love and support, was just the opposite. They didn't just hurt us, they hurt us in a way that left a mark. Maybe you were abused by another member of the church, but when you brought it to the leadership they did nothing. They defended the abuser and minimized your hurt. Maybe the kids in your Christian middle school bullied you, they were exquisitely cruel and then went to chapel and sang all those praise songs like nothing happened. Or maybe it was a family member who was pious and smiling at church, but harsh and controlling at home. The world is full of people who used to go to church. And when you ask them why they don't go anymore, they tell a traumatic story and then they say, "*I'm never going back.*" Do you know anyone like that? I'll bet you do. I'll bet some of them are people you love dearly.

What do we say to these people? What is our response to stories of hurt, injustice and hypocrisy? I want to say a number of things here. First, I want to say what Tim Keller says. There's no way to give a triumphalist answer to this objection. You can't get out there and try to explain all the bad stuff away. It won't work to try to trump the ten stories of Christians who've done terrible things with 11 stories of Christians who've done wonderful things. There are lots of times to celebrate the work God has done through heroes of the faith; this is probably not one of them. You have to face the truth of our past.

Second, without getting too defensive here, this is not exclusively a Christian problem. This is a human problem. Meanness, pettiness, hypocrisy, massacres, atrocities—all people, all cultures, all religions are guilty of these things. Including Atheists. We have the crusades and the Holocaust on our record. The Atheists have the Stalin's Gulags and Mao's great leap forward on theirs. Millions died in both. And all the small scale nastiness, and cruelty and hypocrisy that shows up in church people also shows up in Atheists and Buddhists and Hindus and Zoroastrians. It's not a church problem; it's a people problem. More specifically, it's a heart problem. We human beings are glorious creatures made in the image of God. We are capable of great acts of creativity, courage and imagination. But something is wrong inside us, something is twisted. When we are under duress, when we are afraid, when we've been hurt, we can break bad. And when we break bad, all that creativity and imagination and power can be used for terrible purposes. 'The heart is deceitful above all things' said Jeremiah. Humans are the problem. Which ultimately means this is a place where we can connect with people who think differently than we do. When they accuse us of wrongdoing, we can say that we are struggling with them and with the rest of humanity. We are trying to find a way to deal with our complicated hearts.

Which brings me to the third thing I want to say. We know that we have fallen short, but we are trying to deal with our failures. No one who reads the Bible should be surprised that the church is an imperfect community. If you know the kinds of people God calls and uses in this book, then you are not surprised that church people can be hypocritical and nasty. Noah got so drunk in his tent that he passed out naked. Moses' hot temper led him to murder a man. Jacob lied and cheated so he could steal his brother's blessing. Samson was vain, lustful and violent. Judah took up with prostitutes. David murdered one of the officers in his army so that he could be with his wife. Jesus 12 disciples, the 12 men He chose as the foundation for His church weren't any better. Betrayal. Denial. Constant arguments over who was the greatest. Throughout scripture, these are the people God chooses and uses. "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called," says Paul, "not many of you were wise by human standards." That's an understatement. The community of the faithful described to us in the Bible is not a gathering of shiny, happy people. It's a collection of broken, limping souls.

It reminds me of that old saying: the church is not a museum for perfect saints, it is a hospital for sinners. When you walk onto the floor of a hospital, you expect to find unhealthy people: people limping and pulling their IV's around, people with bandages and people in wheelchairs. In the same way when you walk into church you should expect to see people who are angry and proud, you should expect to find addicts and adulterers, you should expect to find failures and criminals, you should expect to find busted people and we are here because we want to get better. We are here because in this place we meet a man who has the words of eternal life. Walking into a church and complaining that the place is full of sinners is a little like walking into an AA meeting and saying, "This place is terrible! Everyone here is an alcoholic!"

Which brings us to our passage. This passage is a great example about how Paul was always transparent about his failures. Paul often began his presentation of the gospel by admitting his own bad past. Our passage is a great example. Paul is brutal with himself. He pulls no punches when it comes to self-critique: *“I was once a blasphemer. I was a persecutor. I was a violent man. You know how bad it was, I consider myself the very worst of sinners.”*

This is pretty typical of Paul. He often begins a presentation of the gospel with an account of his own sinfulness and weakness. Ephesians 3:8 “Although I am the least of all the Lord’s people, grace was given to me.” 1 Corinthians 15:9 “I am the least of all the apostles and do not deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” In Acts 26, Paul starts his gospel presentation to Agrippa by admitting his record as a person who voted to have Christians put to death. Paul knows he’s a mess. He freely confesses it. He also knows that he’s not alone. His fellow church members are a mess too. Romans 3: “there is nobody righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” In all these places, Paul is saying in one way or another: “Of course there are broken people in the church. This is a hospital! We all limp into this place hungry for the healing grace of Jesus.”

At AA meetings, you know that when the people get together to fight their addiction, they start by admitting what they are. “Hi. My name is Peter and I’m an alcoholic.” They don’t just give themselves that general label, they get specific. “I ruined my marriage. I lost my job. Here’s how I hurt the people who loved me.” But I’m here with my heart open and I want to be a new person. They got that from Paul. “Hi everyone, my name is Paul and I am the worst of sinners. But by the grace of God, in Christ I am being changed! I’m not all the way there yet, (Philippians 3, not that I’ve already attained it) but I am trying! I’m pressing on toward the goal, and I know that He who began a good work in me will see it carry it on to completion.

It’s such an important recognition that we do something similar every week in church. Every week we have a service of confession. We gather, we sing our opening hymn and then we admit our sins. It’s like we come into church and say, “Hi everyone, my name is Peter Jonker and I’m a sinner, but I’m here with an open heart and Jesus is making me into a new person.” Some people complain about these times of confession. There are many churches where confession of sin is no longer a part of the liturgy. Why do we focus so much on our sinfulness? It’s so negative! Can’t we focus on the positive? God bless these churches, but I think they’re wrong.

Look at our passage. We’ve already said that Paul is so hard on himself in this passage: *“I am the worst of sinners! I am the worst!”* But now: is the tone of the passage negative? Is Paul all down on himself? Is he depressed? No. it’s the opposite. Paul is overjoyed because even the worst of sinners received grace. I was a terrible guy, but God gave me mercy! The grace of our Lord was poured out on me along with faith and love. There is hope!! Guys, if God can save me, he can save anyone!!

Paul knows that the human heart is a mess. Paul knows the kind of things we humans are capable of. Paul is not afraid to look at the depths of his sin, because he has seen the heights of God’s love for him in Jesus Christ his Lord. Paul’s not afraid to face the terrible things he’s done, because he’s seen the face of Jesus, and it’s a face of fiercely determined love. Paul’s first word can be about his sin and failure because Paul knows that the last word belongs to God’s grace. So reflecting on his sin in the light of God’s love does not lead him to despair, it leads him to doxology. *“Now to the King eternal immortal invisible the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever amen!* This is the gospel!

The human heart is a mess and people are capable of terrible things, but Jesus has come, Jesus has laid down his life to make all things new. I'm a mess, you're a mess, but here in this place we have hope. So bring your messy heart to this place because the healer you will meet in this place is strong and full of mercy and He can fix your stuff.

When I look at the failures of the past it's easy to get depressed. Our complicity in slavery and racism. The cost of religious wars. The tragic results of Christian Anti-Semitism. And when I combine them with all the petty things church members have done to each other it's easy to think, "Oh my goodness we are the worst. When I consider the challenges of the future it's easy to get depressed: figuring out how to come back to church and navigating all the challenges that surround it. Figuring out how to address the racial divide in this community and in this nation. This is terrible. Where are we going! But when I hear Paul say that Christ Jesus came to this world to deal with things that are the very worst. When I consider that, I see the mercy of my Lord. When I consider the power of the resurrection. When I hear Paul standing with Joy and hope before the God of all grace, then I get up in the morning and I say, here I am Lord, send me. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible the only God be honor and glory for ever and ever amen.

© Rev. Peter Jonker