

## ***How do outsiders view us?***

In all my writings, I've tried to be positive, indeed I'm feeling more positive than ever in my Christian life. But one thing I've been wrestling with lately is why are there so many husbands who rarely or never attend church? Is that true of your church? I can name more than a dozen men, some of whom just say they're too busy, while others are quite strongly anti.

I've been thinking about what might be putting them off, and I wonder if it's the following view of the Christian faith. If any of them have been on an "Introduction to Christianity" course, here's what they would probably have been told:

First the bad news: We all sin, we all break God's rules, and this makes God angry. That's because God is "too holy to look upon sin". We've broken God's rules, so we deserve to be punished. But here's the good news: In his love for us, God has made a way so we don't need to be punished. Jesus came and took our sin on himself and died for us. Some courses illustrate this with a true story where, in a prisoner-of-war camp, someone without any family volunteers to die instead of a man who has a wife and kids back home. God takes the punishment we deserve.

So now we can be justified, "just as if I'd" never sinned. Problem solved! We've been given a free pardon and therefore we can be allowed into heaven. We can have a relationship with him now – we just need to repent of our sin and turn to God: pray a prayer to admit our sin, accept his forgiveness (and some add: receive the Holy Spirit) and we're now saved; we're a Christian.

That might be how they see it, but we know there's more to it, much more! Becoming a Christian is just the beginning of an exciting life as a disciple of Jesus. We soon discover that (bad news) we go on sinning, but good news: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive our sins." And he graciously forgives us each time we mess up (again!).

But to grow, we need discipleship: we do need to exercise discipline. All new Christians must be taught to read their Bibles regularly; they must pray regularly; they must go to church; and they must evangelise their friends and family. And we can encourage one another in this: we can get together in small groups, where we pray for one another and hold each other accountable. "Are you reading your Bible? Are you praying? Have you shared the gospel with anyone this week?"

And we also need to hold one another accountable for **sin**, because we all know how easy it is to justify our actions, because they make us feel good. So we need to be willing to tell one another when **they** are straying. Obviously, we need to be very careful about this. We need to read our Bibles carefully so that we can tell the person exactly where they are going wrong and justify it by showing them what the Bible teaches.

And as Christians, we also need to be 'salt and light', as Jesus taught, so that we can stop the rot and, let's face it, there's more evil out there than ever before, because Christian principles have been rejected! But once again, we need to be **very** careful; we need to study our Bible diligently, so that we can justify exactly what **is** wrong and why. Then we can tell society where it is going wrong and help to put it right.

Great! And what does all this give us?

Sadly, it all too easily gives us a Christian faith that is based on fear, and guilt and shame. Or am I being unrealistic?

Do we read the Bible because we feel we ought to or because we're fascinated by it and excited by the way it speaks into our lives? Do we pray because we feel we ought to or because we simply enjoy spending time with God and want to share our concerns with him. Do we tell other people about our faith because the vicar told us to, or because we just can't stop talking about the person we love so dearly?

On another topic, it has struck me recently what an absolute scandal it is that churches split and split and split because each thinks it has the 'right answers' (i.e. what 'the Bible clearly teaches'). What a waste of time and energy, distracting us from sharing the good news. And it gives outsiders the chance to say, "You can't even agree amongst yourselves, so why should we take seriously what you're saying about 'being saved'?"

But on my exciting journey this past two years I feel that I've joined in a stream that Sue discovered 10 years ago on the Cambridge spiritual directors' course. We've benefitted hugely from people from a very wide range of traditions, Orthodox, Catholic and various flavours of Protestantism. It started for me when God knocked away the props of "what I've always been taught", and left me floundering in 'Does God exist even?!'

It's been scary at times, but what joy it has brought me, and how it has deepened my relationship God and with Sue.

Thank you, Father!

Paul Bev. 19.1.18