

Whether we like it or not, the time we live in is called the post-Christian, post-Modern era. And in this time, we find a lot of confusion about what it means to be a Christian.

Here are just a few books from non-Christians trying to figure us out.

- They Like Jesus, but Not the Church,
- Lord, Deliver Me from Your Followers
- And finally, Un-Christian: What a Generation Thinks about Christianity. That last one is put out by the popular church research group called the Barna Group.

On the inside cover of the last book it says, “A major new research project, unveiled for the first time in this book, describes the increasingly negative reputation of Christians, especially among young Americans.

Here’s what their research shows. Christians are best known for what they are against. Perceived as being judgmental, anti-homosexual, too political. Young people quickly point out that they believe Christianity is no longer as Jesus intended. Christianity is Un-Christian.” Let that sit with you for a moment.

Now let’s reflect on what Paul told the first-century Christians, “You yourselves are our letter...known and read by everybody.” Let me repeat that.

A true statement then and a true statement now. Especially that last part. We are known and read by everyone. Say this with me. I am known and read by everyone.

Who here thinks that that the Church was ever intended to be a tidy garden?

Next question. What do you think attracted so many people to Christianity in the first place? Let me help you. People way back in the time of the early church noticed something. “Look how much they love one another! I want some of that!”

Church family, Hate, judgment and close-mindedness are the greatest enemies of Christianity. Honestly, I would say these are winning the battle.

Do you know who's really enjoying this. Who's eating popcorn watching all this? The devil. So let me ask a question. Can we stop giving the devil this joy, this deadly ammo!

This brings us to our passage today. Romans Chapter 12. Paul gives us a beautiful glimpse into what Christianity should be about. Friends, if we could all live this way—I'm pretty sure that Christianity would be the coolest thing in the world!

Let's look at one of the very first words of our passage today in verse 9. Paul begins with the word: "Love." Here Paul says, "Love must be sincere." Sincere is defined as: "genuine; real." Let me warn you, this passage is a mirror. So, the first thing that comes to mind. Is our love for God and for others genuine and real...or do we just play lip-service?

Are we putting our faith into action, or are we sitting in the bleachers with a pencil and paper creating judgmental lists?

Do we really love other people or just the folks who look like we do; think like we do; believe like we do; smell like we do?

Paul continues, "Honor one another above yourselves...Share with God's people who are in need...Live in harmony with one another...Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."

We may think that the most dangerous thing in the world is a weapon made by human hands...a nuclear bomb, a disease, a famine...But none of those things compare to what I think is the most dangerous weapon in the world. A closed mind!!!

A closed mind does not like anyone who does not think just like they do.

A closed mind holler's: "You're either for us or against us!"

A closed mind causes folks to hate others...and it's not anything personal...that other person may be the nicest person in the world—willing to give you the shirt off his or her back...

...but if that person holds a different theological or political view.....a closed mind is capable hating that person!

Paul has the audacity to say this. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." Not just any love. The word used here is agape love—love that is unconditional!

Do we love others unconditionally? For those who pick and choose, how are they living into this true Christian life that Paul speaks of?

This brings us to our focus today on stewardship. Our final look at what you might be able to do to help our ministries in 2025. (Remind of how to fill out pledge cards)

When it comes to money matters, often churches split into two camps. The first camp let's name them "the green eye shades". They believe the church should think and act like a business. The second camp let's call them "the holier-than-thous". They decry any money talk. Comparing it to the money changers in the temple. They want to believe that God will provide if the church just has enough faith. These are two camps who often talk past each other and prevent meaningful discussions.

What if both camps are missing one important thing. Does a spiritual perspective on money mean putting aside practical thinking? If we take seriously what scripture and faith teach, a spiritual perspective regarding money and finances is a practical perspective, and that practical perspective can be spiritual.

When we understand what faith really teaches about money and our responsibilities as stewards of the gifts God entrusts to us, we discover that a faithful Christian approach to finances is

neither naïve nor fanciful. It's an approach that requires us to work diligently to use our individual resources to serve God's purposes.

Church family, I'm not going to sugar coat this. Ministry takes money. I am not ashamed to acknowledging that or to work diligently to protect, sustain, and grow the financial resources that support our ministry. This means encouraging greater giving where possible, budgeting responsibility, financing capital needs, and developing new revenue streams to support our ministries. We just received almost 6K from the conference to help with deferred maintenance. These efforts are the means by which we Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

God calls us to be responsible stewards. Believing that God lovingly provides for our needs, we align ourselves with God's purposes when we exercise prudence in caring for our own financial needs and those of our faith communities. When we carefully steward the things that God entrusts to us, we become partners in God's mission and help bring forth God's abundance. To suggest that faith in God's generosity excuses us from financial prudence is not only naïve and irresponsible, it tempts skeptics to dismiss the entirety of the Christian message about money and stewardship as whimsical and meritless. As stewards, we have a role to play in bringing forth the abundance that God promises by using resources fruitfully and accountably.

Back to our passage where Paul instructs us: "Share with God's people who are in need."

Dr. Leonard Sweet of Drew University Seminary shares this story: "Its 1917 in Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church had a debate that nearly split the church. The Orthodox churches trace their roots back to Antioch, where followers of the Way of Jesus Christ were called Christians for the very first time. This predates our roots that go back to Rome, so to have a church split whose roots go so far back is serious business.

The issue that caused so much controversy? The size of the candles in the chancel. Should they be 22 inches tall or as some innovators were saying, only 18 inches tall? 18 inches was common! How dare they! The proper suitable size for God's table is 22 inches!

This is what nearly split the Russian church in 1917. History buffs. Anyone remember what else was going on in Russia in 1917? Revolutionaries were plotting because in some places in Russia people were starving and reduced to eating human flesh!

The revolutionaries planned to change this situation by murdering thousands of people. And what was the church arguing about? The size of candles!!! Literally millions of Russians died of starvation.”

Dr. Sweet writes: “God help us and forgive us because we get so turned inward while the world suffers, and we fail to show the love of Christ with one another, argue about things that Jesus does not care about, and let the world starve!

Church family. Let's champion unconditional love. Let's champion non-judgmental attitudes. Let's embrace humility, service, and hope. Let's stand against hypocrisy, elitism, hate-mongering and ignorance.

Throughout all of human history, there is a universal truth. People are attracted by sincere love. “Look how they love one another!” “Look how they love...even their enemies!” That was the attraction for the early church. That is what Christianity is all about!!! “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” I have nothing else to add.