

Series: "Questions About Life and God"
"Why don't Christians act better than they do?"

"Why don't Christians act better than they do?" Have you ever wondered that? A lot of people who aren't Christians certainly ask that! Most people would agree that if someone says he or she is a Christian, you expect a higher level of behavior from this person than from someone who doesn't claim to believe in Jesus. A Christian ought to be a better person - more kind and unselfish, with a higher moral standard. But sometimes this is not the case!

There are many kinds of experiences that can cause people to ask this question: Why don't Christians act better than they do? For instance, someone who's had a problem with drugs or alcohol comes to Christ, has a sound conversion experience and begins to live a new life in Christ, free of drugs or alcohol. Then sometime later you hear that this person is drinking again. Or, somebody is active in the church, even a leader in the church. Yet you know in this person's life outside the church, he or she is living in a way that calls into doubt their moral or spiritual integrity. Or, a congregation splits into factions over an issue. Instead of showing Christian love and understanding, people are mean-spirited and downright nasty to one another. In some ways this church fight seems more vicious than those squabbles that take place outside the church. I think all of us could point out instances of Christians behaving badly, or of some respected Christian falling into some kind of serious sin or moral failure.

Why don't Christians act better than they do? After all, the Bible says "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Doesn't this verse (and other verses in the Bible) tell us that when you come to Christ your life is changed. The old sinful behaviors are now gone? Yet, often it seems as though Christians are no different than anyone else. *How come?*

One of the reasons is because of the influence of Satan. Many chuckle at the notion of a devil, or Satan. You really believe in a devil! But Scripture reveals that there is a devil. Jesus acknowledged the reality of Satan. In His temptations in the wilderness, Jesus confronted Satan eyeball to eyeball!

Jesus once said to Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for *you* that *your own* faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus said Satan has desired *you all* (presumably meaning the disciples), but He prayed specifically for Peter. Jesus would depend on these disciples to get His message out to the world when He was gone. Think how that would be hindered if Satan could control their lives! *Satan wants to destroy people.* Jesus called Satan a *murderer* (John 8:44). And he works extra hard on those people who are godly, those making a difference for God! (Satan doesn't have to spend much energy on godless people!). Sometimes he succeeds in making the most effective Christians crash and burn!

Another reason why Christians can act badly is because of our inherent sin-nature. We can't blame everything on the devil! Wasn't it comedian Flip Wilson who used to say, "The devil made me do it"? There's another powerful force at work that causes Christians to fall and to act in less than admirable ways. That's our own sinful human nature.

The Bible has a much more sober view of human nature than a lot of people today. Many think we're all basically good people, and it's only a few who are really, really bad eggs - terrorists, child molesters, people who rob Turkey Hill stores, (and most politicians)! But the Bible says that all of us are a strange mix of good and evil. There is a *good side* to us, because we are made in the image of God. But there's an *evil side* to human nature that is perverse and wicked. The prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

You may say, "But I thought when a person becomes a Christian, when we are born again, that this old sinful nature *dies* within us, and there is a power in the gospel to overcome the evil side of our human nature." There is! But even once we give our lives over to Christ, the old sinful nature within us is not entirely eradicated. It'd be great if it were, but it isn't!

Let's look at some Scriptures that help to clarify this matter. Turn to Romans, chapter 7. Now would you agree that the Apostle Paul was about as great a Christian as you'll ever find? I think so! But look at what he says: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15 18-19). Have you ever felt like that?

Let's read more: "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 8:21-24). But here's the positive note: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verse 25).

As long as we're on this earth, we will struggle to some degree with our sinful nature. See, when we are born *physically* we take on human nature. Part of that nature is evil. But when we are *born again or reborn spiritually*, we get a new nature: the Holy Spirit comes into us and resides in us. *Our life then becomes a battleground for spiritual warfare.* God's Spirit prompts us to do good, but the old sinful nature (which Paul calls "the flesh"), pulls us towards evil.

This inward conflict is described in Galatians, chapter 5. "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (Galatians 5:18-19).

When Christians behave badly, it is the "flesh" (the sinful nature in us) ruling. Do you want to see a sampling of what Christians do when the "flesh" rules? Here's a description of Christians behaving badly: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21).

Another reason Christians can act so badly is because we live in a fallen world. The world and life itself is marked by evil and death. And we all are influenced and affected by what goes on in the world around us.

As a Marriage and Family therapist, I understand that *even devoted Christians* can be emotionally damaged and dysfunctional. For instance, experiences early on in our family of origin can damage us into adulthood. Here's someone we will call "Trudi". Trudi never got much affirmation from her parents growing up, and as an adult Christian, she still has a deep-seated need to crave affection and attention. She drives her friends crazy with her love-hunger. Even showering love and praise on her is like pouring water into a bucket with no bottom – Trudi is emotionally unable to feel this affirmation from others.

Here's another person we will call "Jeff". Jeff grew up in a home where his dad was an alcoholic. For Jeff and his family, life was chaotic and at the mercy of dad's temper, and fits of drunken rage. Like many adult children of alcoholics, Jeff is obsessive about wanting to control things (since, growing up, his life was always out of control). The problem is, Jeff is a leader in the church, and people resent it when he tries to manipulate and control everything that takes place in the church.

So, all of these factors help explain why Christians sometimes don't act very well. The *devil* and his seductions. The *flesh*, that still unredeemed part of our human nature. The *world* – and how living in a broken, fallen world impacts our lives. It's interesting that in classic Christian theology, the enemies of the soul are these three - the world, the flesh, and the devil!

So, is this an excuse for followers of Jesus acting badly? Does this mean there is no hope for Christians to rise above this mediocre level of moral behavior? No. ***The Bible urges followers of Jesus to progress towards a life of love and goodness.*** I could quote many Scriptures. Here are just a couple: Colossians 3:9-10 says, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." i.e. Make every effort to strip off the old unredeemed nature and put on the new behaviors we can have in Christ. There is a power in the gospel help us overcome our sinful nature. "We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin" (Romans 6:6).

What are some of the ways we can keep ourselves from falling into serious sin and becoming a "Christian casualty"? How can we fashion a life more consistent with our profession of being a follower of Jesus? Here are some helps.

Recognize our weak points and our vulnerability. Be truthful with ourselves. What are the places where I can easily be led astray? What are the temptations that I find hard to resist? Once we know our weak points, avoid putting ourselves in situations where we know we'll be tempted. For instance, if we're in bondage to credit card debt, cut up the credit cards. Don't hang out at the mall, or on Amazon or QVC. Be careful, too, that we don't get overconfident and think

we could never fall prey to a certain sin. 1 Corinthians 10:12 cautions us, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

Stay in the word. This is another way to safeguard our behavior. Reading and studying the Bible is *food for our soul*; it makes us stronger in Christ. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Learning Scripture, soaking it up, remembering its words, claiming its promises, can help us turn from evil and live better for Christ.

Maintain a steady prayer life. One reason our behavior can lag behind what we profess is because we neglect prayer. To be honest, just praying doesn't guarantee we won't fall into some kind of sinful behavior. But it helps keep us open to God so God can pour His power into us. Prayer is listed in Ephesians 6 as part of the armor we can put on to resist evil.

Choose Christ in the little, daily choices we make. Most Christians don't fall into disgrace because they suddenly decided to do something terrible that would shame themselves and dishonor the name of Christ. Usually the big falls come as a result of little compromises that we have made. Having integrity in the little, daily decisions helps produce a life of goodness.

Allow yourself to be held accountable. It's wise to meet regularly with a few Christian friends who will be able to hold each other accountable morally and spiritually by asking questions like. Mike Slaughter is pastor of one of the largest, most creative and dynamic United Methodist Churches, Ginghamsburg UMC. I've heard him in his conferences tell of meeting regularly with a few men in his church who hold him accountable morally and spiritually.

Finally, if you need help, get help! As I said earlier, some of us are behaving badly because of something in our past or something in our present that's causing us to be dysfunctional. That's why God has given us Christian counselors – marriage and family therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists.

The truth is, even the brightest and best Christians are always under construction! It's like the bumper sticker that says, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." This is not to make excuses for Christians who behave badly, but it is to acknowledge that we're all a work in progress!

God isn't finished with us yet! Billy Graham's wife, Ruth, once saw a road sign, where a construction project had been completed. The sign said, "End of construction; thank you for your patience." She said, "That's what I want on my tombstone." And that's what's on her tombstone: "End of construction; thank you for your patience!" In heaven, I believe we will be fully redeemed and perfect; but unfortunately, not quite yet!

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