

ESF, Lord's day service message

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## **The Marks of Authentic Christians**

Acts 11:19-26

*<sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. <sup>20</sup> Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*

*<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.*

*<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Some years ago Time magazine carried a story about a controversy that once raged in a Waterloo, Iowa courthouse over the question, "What is a Christian?" It all started when a local doctor who had been very wealthy died, and when his will was read it was discovered that he had left a large sum of money to be distributed to the Christians in town, specifically "...to persons who believe in the fundamental principles of the Christian religion, and in the Bible, and who are endeavoring to propagate the same."

When the will became public, a dispute grew over exactly who in town were Christians and therefore worthy of a share of the doctor's money. Suits and countersuits were filed, and eventually the court was given the responsibility of settling the issue. Each of the ministers in town who had staked a claim was called in to appear before the judge to be interviewed in order to see if they were in agreement when it came to exactly what, "Christianity's fundamental principles" were. There were representatives of all the various denominations, Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists. In fact, even a few Unitarians showed up.

So, as you can imagine, there was a great difference of opinion in that courtroom about what it meant to be a "Christian."

The word, "Christian" has originated not from the churches in America, or from the churches in Europe but from the church of Antioch, an ancient city in Syria. It was not the believers of the church who called themselves "Christians." It was unbelievers in the city who called the believers of Christ "Christians." The unbelievers used the word because they saw clear differences in the lives of believers of Jesus Christ although they did not fully understand what made the differences. To the unbelievers' eyes, the followers of Christ were authentic.

### **Christ' power is manifested**

The believers in Jerusalem were experiencing great revival for a while. Then suddenly severe persecution broke out against the church and they were forced to scatter (Acts 8:1-2). They lost their jobs and homes. And they had to scatter to foreign lands. But they did not give in to self-pity. They did not bear grudges against the persecutors. They did not give up on their faith in Christ. They kept telling the gospel of Christ wherever they went : "*Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews*" (verse 19). And through their evangelism, "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

How were they able to live such tenacious lives?

The word in verse 21 explains that they were able to live such lives because the Lord's hand was with them (verse 21). The Lord's hand means the powerful protection, guidance and provision of the Lord.

When people see believers who do not give up and come back from ashes and tragedies triumphantly, they recognize that there is something powerful in the believers' lives.

Paul testifies of such a powerful Christian life in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 this way: *"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."*

This is the mark of an authentic Christian.

If you believe Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and witness the gospel of the Lord, His hand will be with you.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus says, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

When you think about witnessing the gospel, you may think that you must be a specially trained Bible teacher or evangelist.

But the believers who witnessed Christ's gospel to the people in Antioch were ordinary believers. They just "spoke" the gospel to the people (verse 20). The Greek word for "speak" is the word for normal conversation. The implication is that the believers didn't preach as

orators in the marketplace. Rather, in their everyday contacts, they told others about Jesus Christ.

All Christians can do what they did. The Lord gives every believer the gift of evangelism. Every Christian has the gift of evangelism. While a Christian uses the gift, the Lord empowers the Christian.

Back in the 19th century when Hudson Taylor was going to China from England to preach the gospel, there were no airplanes. So he took a sailing ship. As the ship neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, the missionary heard an urgent knock on his stateroom door. He opened it, and there stood the captain of the ship. "Mr. Taylor," he said, "we have no wind. We are drifting toward an island where the people are heathen, and I fear they are cannibals." "What can I do?" asked Taylor. "I understand that you believe in God. I want you to pray for wind." "All right, Captain, I will, but you must set the sail." "Why that's ridiculous! There's not even the slightest breeze. Besides, the sailors will think I'm crazy." But finally, because of Taylor's insistence, he agreed. Forty- five minutes later he returned and found the missionary still on his knees. "You can stop praying now," said the captain. "We've got more wind than we know what to do with!"

Hudson Taylor was not a famous missionary at that time. But the Lord's hand was with him while he was going to China to preach the gospel. The powerful hand of the Lord is manifested not only through some special evangelists, but through every Christian who exercise the gift of evangelism.

### **Christ's love is practiced**

The believers in the Antioch church did not reach out to the people of one race but the people of all races in the city. *Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to*

*Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus (verse 20). They opened their hearts to all kinds of people and reached out to them with the love of Christ.*

When believers open their hearts and accept and love all kinds of people, they demonstrated God's amazing love. Then unbelievers can see that believers are different, because ordinary human nature does not and cannot do that.

If we have the love of Christ, we are able to love all kinds of people regardless of the differences in races, cultures, or social status. Such inclusive love is the mark of authentic Christians. Jesus says in John 13:34-35 “... *As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples...*”

The early Latin writer, Tertullian of Carthage, declared that the one thing that converted him to Christianity was not the arguments they gave him, because he could find a counterpoint for every argument they would present. “But they demonstrated something I didn't have. The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way that they loved each other.”

In this land, the U.S., we have a great opportunity to receive and practice God's amazing love for all kinds of people. While we are living in Chicago, we can meet people from more than a 100 different countries from all around the world.

When God has given His amazing love to us through Christ, He has a purpose. The purpose is that He wants to use us to carry His love to people all over the world. When we live for that purpose, we can practice God's love. And people can see the difference in our lives.

### **Christ's grace is demonstrated**

When Barnabas came to the Antioch Church, he saw the evidence of God's grace (verse 23). There is no church which has no sinners. There is no church which has no problems. The church in Antioch must have had sinners and some problems too. Many of them might have been new believers and spiritually immature. But Barnabas saw God's grace in the church, and he was glad.

It means that there was joy for the forgiveness of their sins by the blood of Christ. There was forgiveness and reconciliation of Christ among the believers.

Also, with Barnabas, the people in the Antioch Church made unity even with their former enemy, Saul. Saul had a terrible past in his relationship with Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. He was the key man who severely persecuted the believers of Jerusalem. Some believers in the Antioch church came from the Jerusalem church. They knew the persecutor, Saul. They knew Saul as the leader of the persecutors who killed Stephen, one of 7 deacons in the Jerusalem church. Because of Saul they lost their home church in Jerusalem where they enjoyed spiritual revival. Because of Saul, they lost their jobs and homes, were scattered to foreign lands, and had to start their lives all over again.

But Barnabas saw in Paul a new potential in God's grace rather than seeing his horrible past. The believers in the Antioch church did not pay evil for evil. They accepted Saul as a brother in Christ. More than that they allowed him to teach the Bible to them and let him join in the ministry team with Barnabas.

They practiced what Jesus taught them to do for their enemy: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on*

*the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous* (Matthew 5:43-45). As Jesus said, they made reconciliation with an enemy. And they made a strongly united ministry team. As a result the people outside of the church could see the difference in their lives.

Believers can be the best at teamwork. Because believers have grace of forgiveness in Christ. Although they are imperfect, make mistakes, and may not be able to agree with each other on all issues, through the grace of forgiveness they can maintain unity.

This is the difference unbelievers can see in believers' lives. When unbelievers see the unity among believers through forgiveness, they know there is a difference in them.

At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a debate about what is unique about Christianity. Someone suggested what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form in Jesus. But someone quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form."

Another suggestion was offered: what about resurrection? The belief that death is not the final word. That the tomb was found empty. Someone slowly shook his head. Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead. Then, C.S. Lewis walked into the room. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally, he asked, "what's all this rumpus about?" Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves they said, "We're debating what's unique about Christianity."

"Oh, that's easy," answered Lewis. "It's grace." Lewis said that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. The room fell silent.

No other religion has the concept of grace. Buddhists follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride. Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions. Muslims must accumulate countless good deeds to be accepted by their Allah. The Jews observe the law which God requires of them to be righteous.

Only Christianity dares to proclaim God's love is unconditional. An unconditional love that we call grace.