

If we went down to the baseball field this afternoon and someone asked, “What’s a baseball?” You could pull one out. There’d be no question on what a baseball is. If we went to the Burlington Garden Center and someone asked, “What’s a flower?” We could easily point one out. There’s no question on what a flower is. If we went to the library and someone asked, “What’s a book?” We could pull one off the shelf. There would be no question what a book is. But we’re in church this morning and so an obvious question is: *What’s a Christian?*

The answer isn’t as easy as you might think. Everything depends on how you define the word. You can’t really tell who is a Christian and who isn’t until you know what the term means.

Recent polls report that 92% of Americans believe in God while 83% call themselves Christian. If you went to Walmart this afternoon and asked, “Are you a Christian?” you’d get all sorts of answers. “Of course I’m a Christian. I’m an American.” “I was raised in a Christian home.” “I was baptized.” “I’m a Methodist.” “I read my Bible and pray every day.”

Or, you could make it simpler and say, “A Christian is anyone who calls himself a Christian,” which is basically how the pollsters came up with that 83%. It’s very American to say, “I’m a Christian if I say I am.”

The word Christian literally means *the Christ Ones*. The name was first given to followers of Jesus in a city called Antioch, Acts 11:26. The Bible is where we first find the term Christian, so the Bible is our “dictionary” to tell us what a Christian is. ***What does the Bible say is a Christian?***

1. A Christian is someone who admits that they have a problem. You can’t be a Christian unless you first admit you have a problem. The problem I have and you have is that we’re a total mess. It’s what the Bible says in Romans 3:23: *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

In his book, *Whatever Became of Sin* (**picture**), Dr. Karl Menninger tells of a stern-faced, plainly dressed man who once stood on a busy street corner in Chicago. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he’d solemnly lift his right arm, point to the person nearest him, and shout, “*Guilty!*” Then, without changing expression, he’d resume his stiff stance for a few moments before raising his arm, pointing at another pedestrian, and shouting again, “*Guilty!*” Menninger writes that the effect of this strange pantomime on those passing by was almost eerie.

They’d stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again; then hurriedly continue on their way. One man who’d been the object of the man’s strange verdict turned to another and said, “*But how did he know?*” This strange man was right. We’re all guilty. We just don’t like to admit it. Our culture is in denial when it comes to sin. Sin isn’t something we talk about. Calvin Miller (**picture**) writes, “*The word ‘sinful’ was once considered to be an important part of theology but of late it’s only an adjective we apply to gooey desserts and women’s perfume.*”

Sin is most clearly seen in our actions. Sin is things like gossip and slander. It’s cutting people off in traffic or cheating on your taxes. It’s lying, stealing and murder. Sinful actions are plentiful and obvious. 1 John 3:4 says that “*Every one who sins breaks [God’s] law. All sin is lawlessness.*” So our actions can be sinful.

Inaction can be sin as well. Sinful actions are often referred to as sins of commission. James 4:17 says, “*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.*” So, sin is also inaction. This variety is often referred to as a sin of omission. The Book of Common Prayer puts it this way, “*We have done those things we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things we ought to have done.*”

When we see suffering we can help ease, or a lonely, hurting person we can help but do nothing, that’s a sin. Those are sins of omission. I don’t know about you but this thought makes me squirm. I know there are too many times I lazily don’t do what I should. According to the Bible, my inaction is wicked. Our sin can be seen in both our actions and inactions.

The Bible teaches that even our thoughts can be sinful. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus said, “*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*” In Matthew 5:22, 28 He said, “*I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” So we sin in our action, our inaction, and even in our thinking.

That leads to a very important fact when it comes to understanding sin. Sin is our state. It’s not just what we do, it’s who we are. We’re not sinners because we sin; we sin because we’re sinners. It’s not that we can’t do good things. We do. It’s just that on our own we can’t keep from doing bad things. We are what theologians call, “totally depraved.” King David confessed in Psalm 51:5, “*I was born a sinner-yes from the moment my mother conceived me.*” We all have an inherited sin nature. Our culture may deny it, yet all we have to do is watch the news to see evidence of it.

G. K. Chesterton said, *“The doctrine of original sin is the only part of Christian theology that can really be proved.”* Our fallen state is very visible. Man’s inhumanity to man is everywhere. We sin because we’re sinners and we’re helpless on our own to stop.

If you think that maybe I’m being too harsh, take this challenge: For the next 24 hours lead a sinless life. I’m not asking for a sinless decade or year or even a month, just one perfect day. Can you do it? Can you live without sin for one day? No? How about for an hour? Could you promise that for the next sixty minutes you’ll have only pure thoughts and actions? Still hesitant? Then how about the next five minutes? Five minutes of worry-free, anger-free, unselfish living and thinking...can you do it?

I can’t either because like you I have an internal disease called sin. **A Christian is someone who admits that they have a sin problem.**

2. A Christian is someone who admits that they have a predicament. Our sin problem left us with a real predicament. The Bible says in Titus 3:5, *“God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy.”* Our first problem is that we’re sinners but we’ve have a predicament. We can’t fix it. Did you catch that? *Not because of works done by us in righteousness.*

This one is tough for a many to accept. Most people believe that if they’re just good enough, God will let them into heaven. Former New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg (**picture**), thinks he’s earned his ticket to Heaven. According to a *New York Times* article: *“But if he (Bloomberg) senses that he may not have as much time left as he would like, he has little doubt about what would await him at a Judgment Day. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity and smoking cessation, he said with a grin: “I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.”* That’s not what the Bible says, yet most people thinks like this. They think eternal life is something that can be earned.

If this was the system that God setup then it’s only fair to request a rulebook showing how our life will be scored. Do I just have to have more good deeds than bad? Is it more like 70/30? How much is enough? Unfortunately for the “good works” crowd, God did provide guidance on this topic. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* If you’re counting on your good works to get you a golden ticket to the afterlife, then the Bible has some very bad news for you. You have to be perfect. A passing grade on your life’s deeds requires that you lead a perfect life (i.e. ZERO sins). That’s bad enough but it gets worse when you realize that we all have a bent toward sinning. So we’re all imperfect and fall terribly short of a passing grade.

To go to Heaven you have to be perfect...and no one is. We all fall short. It’s like this. Two men were exploring an island when, suddenly, a volcano erupted. In moments, the two found themselves surrounded by molten lava (**picture**). Several feet away was a clearing and a path to safety. To get there, however, they’d have to jump across the river of melted rock.

The first gentlemen was an active senior citizen, but hardly an outstanding physical specimen. He ran as fast as he could, took an admirable leap, but traveled only a few feet. He met a swift death in the super-heated lava. The other explorer was a much younger man in excellent physical condition. He put all his energy into his run, jumped with flawless form and went farther than ever before. Unfortunately, he landed far short of the clearing. Though the younger man clearly outperformed his companion, both were equally dead. Survival was so far out of reach, so ability became a non-issue.

You may be better than me or I may be better than you, but the standard is perfection. Guess what? None of us makes it. And God isn’t impressed by our outward performance. Why? Because God doesn’t look on the outside; He looks on the heart. When He looks inside our heart, He sees why we do what we do. He sees the greed, anger, manipulation, ruthlessness. He hears the secret thoughts we think when we know no one else can hear us. He listens while we mumble under our breath. He knows how we lust for power, fame and glory. Nothing is hidden from God.

That’s why works won’t work! You can’t fool God. He judges our motives, not just our actions. When your life is judged by that strict standard, you don’t look so good. Degrees of "goodness" may be important when hiring an employee or choosing friends, but when the issue is sin, the only standard that matters is God's perfect holiness. The question isn’t how you measure up against the guy down the street, but how you measure up to God. God’s standard is perfection. It’s a standard that even the best behaved or most moral person still can’t reach. And it gets worse.

3. A Christian is someone who realizes that sin has a penalty. Romans 6:23, *“For the wages of sin is death.”* Christians know sin pays a terrible wage: death. The word *“wages”* was used of a soldier’s pay. Picture a cruel dictator, who doesn’t care about his infantry. They’re pawns to preserve his luxurious lifestyle in the palace while they’re on the front lines taking bullets and shrapnel, eating horrible rations, separated from all the comforts of home. Their wage is

death. That's the wage sin pays its servants. If you continue in a life of sin, you'll experience hardship now and eternal punishment as your final paycheck.

We're all going to die. We all have an appointment we must keep. Hebrews 9:27, "*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*" What does the Bible mean by "judgement"? If you don't know Jesus, you'll face judgement. Let me summarize the fate of the lost in four short statements:

At the moment of death, the soul of the lost is sent to hell where it's in conscious torment. In Luke 16, Jesus told of a rich man, who upon his death, went to hell and suffered in the flames of torment. ***The punishment is eternal.*** The Bible teaches an eternal punishment for those who do not know our Lord. Mark 9:43-48 speaks of the fire that's never quenched, a reference to the continuing existence of human personality in hell. ***The body is raised at the Great White Throne judgment.*** Revelation 20:11-15 describes the awesome scene as the unsaved dead are raised to stand before God and receive their final sentence of doom. ***The unsaved are then cast into the lake of fire.*** They'll reside there forever, eternally separate from God. If this is unbearable to think about, then by all means do whatever is necessary to make sure such a fate doesn't befall us or those we love the most.

This is the final destiny of those who don't know Jesus Christ. To make it more personal, it's the final destiny of your friends and neighbors, loved ones, parents, brothers and sisters, even your children, if they die without Jesus Christ. And, yes, my friend, it's your destiny if you die without Jesus, too. The reality of hell is more than a theoretical doctrine. There's a place reserved for you in Hell unless you, by a conscious choice, put your complete trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

4. A Christian is someone who is thankful for God's provision. I'm so glad there's good news and that the gospel message doesn't stop with the penalty for sin. Romans 5:8 says, "*But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Romans 5:8 is the Apostle Paul's version of John 3:16.

Our hope of heaven is secure because it's not based on anything good in us. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 5 with a series of synonyms: we were *helpless* (5:6); *ungodly* (5:6); *sinners* (5:8); and *enemies* (5:10).

Before we can appreciate God's great love, we must feel our own great need for the Savior. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (**picture**) observed: "*In order to measure the love of God you have first to go down before you can go up. You do not start on the level and go up. We have to be brought up from a dungeon, from a horrible pit; and unless you know something of the measure of that depth you will only be measuring half the love of God.*"

"*While we were still sinners.*" The word *sin* means to "miss the mark." It's the picture of the archer who takes aim, looks straight at the bull's eye, pulls the bowstring taut, shoots the arrow and misses the entire target. He thought he was aiming in the right place, but something happens and the arrow never hits the target. No matter how many arrows he shoots, the result is always the same. He always misses the mark.

That's what it means to be a sinner. You try and you fail. You try and you fail. You try and you fail. You do your best but your best isn't good enough. I don't want to pop your bubble but you're not a naturally lovable person and neither am I. Sin has infected our lives so much that it's distorted even the parts we think are beautiful. Sin "uglifies" everything it touches. There's no reason for our Holy, sinless God to love us except this: That's the kind of God He is. In spite of our constant sin and rebellion against His loving laws, God loves us.

Remember Ted Kaczynski (**picture**)? He's better known as "the Unabomber." If you know anything about Kaczynski's story, you know that he grew up a very gifted young man. He became a math professor, but was soon disillusioned and moved to the mountains of Montana. He'd sometimes come down from the mountains to send mail bombs to people he didn't like. After years of investigation, he was finally discovered by police and sent to prison. A while ago, his mother, Wanda Kaczynski, was interviewed by a reporter with the *Chicago Tribune*. She made some statements that were powerful. At the time that the article was written, she had been writing monthly letters to her son in prison. She shared with the reporter what she had written in her most recent letter. She wrote: "*I want you to know, Ted, that when a child is born, the parents give them the gift of unconditional love for a lifetime. This is true of you. No matter what happens, my love for you will be there for a lifetime. Love, Mother.*"

Even after he refused to look at her when he entered the courtroom during his trial, even after he'd given testimony in court that described her as a horrible person—she still loved him enough to write those monthly letters.

We look at that as an amazing act of human love—the love of a mother for her son. But God has done something even more incredible than that. While we were still sinners, still in full-out rebellion against Him—He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us. Romans 5:10 says because of our sin, "*we were God's enemies*" yet as we read in Romans 5:8, "*God demonstrates His love for us in this. While we were still sinners [even though we were His enemies—even though every day we choose to go our way instead of His—in spite of this], Christ died for us.*"

The word *die* is prominent. Since the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), Christ had to die to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus is our substitute, taking the punishment we deserved. While Jesus is our great example of how to live, His

example didn't save us. While He's our great teacher, His teaching didn't save us. His death as our substitute bore the awful penalty of God's justice. Jesus alone can save us and He does it through His death. *"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

5. A Christian is someone who accepts God's pardon. Romans 10:9-10 says, *"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."* There's nothing here about being a good person or doing good things. There are just two basic conditions for being saved from eternal separation from God, and here they are.

To be saved you have to **believe** Jesus died for you and that God raised Him from the dead and you have to **confess** with your mouth that He is the Lord of your life. The word *"believe"* in the Greek means, "to trust in, to cling to, to rely on, to commit to." It's more than just your standard every day belief. The Bible says even the devil has a "normal caliber" of belief.

Unfortunately, there are lots of people who only have a head knowledge of God. They miss Heaven by 18 inches because they don't have the kind of belief that is a foot and a half "lower." They don't have "heart belief." They don't have the kind of conviction that leads to commitment.

I mean, I believe in Hitler but I'm not a Nazi. People can believe in Jesus and still not be Christians. Commitment is the difference. Based on your belief in Who Jesus is and what He did—you decide to commit your life to Him. You cling to Him. You rely on Him. Belief that leads to commitment is more than believing Jesus died on the Cross. It's also believing in His resurrection. It's believing in Easter. As 1 Corinthians 15 says, *"...if there is no resurrection then our faith—our belief—is false."*

The fact Jesus rose again proves that He is Who He said He is. A lot of people died on the cross before Jesus and a lot died after Him. But Jesus died for a specific purpose. He died not for the crimes of all mankind. And then Jesus did something else no one did. He rose again.

If you deny the resurrection of Jesus, you're not a believer. This caliber of belief-inspired commitment to Christ is the first step. Paul says the second thing we must do is to **confess** our belief. In other words, Paul says you can't be sneaky about it or a "closet Christian." You have to give witness as to your belief or its doubtful that your commitment is genuine. If you've committed your life to Christ, you want others to know it, so you share it.

Conclusion: Being a Christian means that you know that you have a **problem**, the problem of sin. It means that you know that sin puts you in a **predicament**. You know that sin has **penalty** but God in the death of Jesus has paid your sin debt. He's made a **provision** for you. But it doesn't do you any good unless you accept God's free gift of **pardon**.

Did you see the movie, *Unbroken*? It's the true story of a man very familiar with failure, Louis Zaperini (**picture**). Louie had a terrible childhood. He was always getting into trouble, always literally running from the law. When he got older his running ability earned him a place on the 1936 U.S. Olympics team. He competed in Berlin under the eyes of Adolph Hitler himself. Louie was training to run again in 1940 but World War II broke out and he joined the army air corps. He became a bombardier on a B-24.

His plane went down in the Pacific. After surviving on a raft for 52 days, he and a friend were captured by the Japanese. In captivity Louis was horribly mistreated—especially by one very evil, sadistic guard. This guard spent years beating Louis. For some reason he singled Louis out for his cruelty. Eventually the war ended and Louis was freed, but in many ways he was still a captive. He constantly re-lived the nightmare of his captivity. He began to drink heavily. He suffered repeated business failures.

One night he dreamed he was sitting on top of that cruel guard strangling him with his bare hands and woke up to realize he was actually strangling his pregnant wife. All this of course took a toll on their marriage.

They were on the brink of divorce until she went to a Billy Graham crusade and became a Christ-follower. She urged Louie to go with her. He reluctantly did with the understanding that he'd leave the minute Graham said, "every head bowed and every eye closed."

Well, when Billy Graham got to that point Louis couldn't keep that pledge. He'd heard the gospel and knew that he needed the forgiveness and restoration—the new start—that Jesus alone makes possible. So instead of leaving the stadium, he walked forward and gave his heart and life to Jesus.

He never had another flashback...not one. He slept like a baby for the rest of his life. He gave up alcohol and said Jesus took away his desire to drink. He became a model husband and father. The anger his nightmare ordeal had given him was replaced with a deep peace and abiding joy. He forgave his captors, even the cruel guard. He and his wife started a camp for problem boys where he shared with them what Jesus had done for him. He was a repeat speaker at

Billy Graham crusades, sharing his testimony with thousands. God healed his war-ravaged body and he began to run again. He even carried the Olympic torch in the 1984 Olympic Games.

I love this story. I love it because it's yet another testimony of the fact that Jesus specializes in redeeming failures. This story and my own experience shows that Jesus can help us to start over. We can get up from our past failures and go on to become all God wants us to be.

Are you a Christian? Do you know that you're a sinner and that Jesus died for you? Have you accepted His gift of salvation, His pardon? You must call upon the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10:9).

My friend, that's what it means to be a Christian. It means trusting in Christ so much that you risk your eternity on what He did for you in His life and in His death. That's what Easter is all about!

Are you a Christian? If not, please come to Jesus today, run to the Cross and commit your life to Him.