



## CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2022



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**A little over 2000 years ago, our Saviour left His home in glory to come to this earth.**

However, His perfect and sinless life was met with cruelty and indifference from God's people, their hearts hardened by hypocrisy and a pretence of holiness under the Law of Moses.

As the Lawgiver in the flesh, Jesus asserted that the Jewish leaders of His day had forced their own unreasonable and burdensome requirements upon the congregation (Matthew 23:1ff). He urged the crowds and His disciples to *"observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice"* (vs 3). The scribes and Pharisees had interpreted and embellished the Law of Moses to suit themselves.

Not many years later, the apostle Paul rebuked the Galatian Christians for distorting the simple gospel message that he and other apostles had brought to them earlier (Galatians 1:6-10). He was astonished at how quickly they were *"turning to a different gospel"* (vs 6).

Throughout the ages, God's people, irrespective of the Covenant they have lived under, have often struggled to live as they should, even to the point of ignoring God's approved forms of worship and adopting ideas and practices of their own.

Over the last century, especially, we have seen a proliferation of religious groups emerge around the world, claiming to be the true church of our Lord, but proclaiming various doctrines that simply have no foundation in the Word of God. Some of these groups have even published their own "translations" of the Bible to promote their particular, non-Biblical ideas, or produced books claiming to contain "latter-day revelations" from God, like *"The Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Jesus Christ"*.

Back in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, the apostle Paul wrote to the younger evangelist Timothy that, *"the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"* (2 Timothy 4:3).

Just as it was true back then, this problem of "human wisdom" continues today. Churches are constantly fracturing as people choose to follow particular teachers or new doctrines rather than agreeing to follow the unchanging Word of God. Unfortunately, some churches, even conservative groups previously known for their faithful adherence to God's Word, can harden their hearts and morph into cults because of the leaders they choose to follow, totally alienating good people from the grace, mercy and forgiveness of Christ.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said He would build His church and it would endure through time, yet we know that the church is not only constantly under outside attack from Satan but, at times, it really struggles with the imperfect human nature of those within. False teachers divert unwitting souls away from the truth. Ego-driven individuals, like Diotrephes in 3 John verse 9, seek pre-eminence over others, undermining the leadership of faithful men. Immature individuals lead others astray by assuming they know better than the *"ancient paths"* (cf. Jeremiah 6:16). And churches die because they lose their zeal for Christ and for the truth of His teachings. Consider the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6.

In Matthew 23:13-15, Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of shutting “*the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces*”. He didn’t mince His words. “*For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe, to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*”

This reminds me of a man who used to go door-to-door preaching the gospel, who once telephoned me and said that I was going to go to hell because I no longer went to his church. Notice what Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees of His day: “*hypocrites*”. Likewise, that man was also a hypocrite. “*His church*” was filled with “*anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit*” (2 Corinthians 12:20), false witness, tale-bearing, self-righteousness, false teaching and more. Though they might have thought they were doing the will of God in isolating me and condemning me, their behaviour was more like that of a cult, rather than that of the church that Jesus died for.

**As Jesus said, such men slam the door to heaven in the faces of others.**

Yet, the apostle Paul taught, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). Every one of us makes mistakes, makes poor decisions from time to time, or violates the express teachings of Christ. Not one of us is perfect and those that seek to set themselves over others on the basis of their supposed holiness fall into the same trap of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century scribes and Pharisees who considered themselves more righteous even than the Christ.

Further, Jesus warned his disciples to leave the weeds (or “*tares*”, King James Version) that had grown up amongst the wheat for the reapers that He would send at harvest time (Matthew 13:24-30). Yet, it would appear that some would-be “*leaders of God’s people*” are content to judge others and to excommunicate at will, sometimes on the sole basis of rumours and gossip, ignoring Scriptures that don’t suit their purpose, and twisting or putting their own interpretation on other Scriptures which they feel justify their decisions.

**Consider the following questions...**

If Jesus gave His life on Calvary for everyone, and if it is Christ Himself who adds us to His church (Acts 2:47), why do these false teachers give themselves authority to *exclude* people they no longer wish to fellowship?

And, if the Lord “*is patient ... and not wishing that any should perish*” (2 Peter 3:9), why do these false teachers forbid their fellow believers from having normal, functional relationships with members of their own families? What are they afraid of?

The apostle Paul, in the first chapter of his letter to the Roman Christians, spoke at length about the “*ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth*” (vs 18). He says, “*They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless*”, verses 29-31.

Whilst this is an apt description for many outside the church today, it is also an incredibly insightful description of some people who consider themselves to be *within* the church.

Consider the malice of “disfellowshipping” (the word is not even in the Bible) someone without even discussing the grievance first, and without following the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17.

Consider the heartlessness of destroying family relationships on the basis of stories spread by gossipers, slanderers or inventors of evil.

Consider the haughtiness or arrogance of teachers who insist that children can no longer have a relationship with their own father or grandfather because of their own twisted understanding of God’s Word.

How do they interpret the words of Jesus, when the Lord said, “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*”? (Refer: Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, Luke 20:25)

Did God’s people need to like Caesar to respect him as Emperor? Did God’s people need to think Caesar was sinless or righteous to pay taxes to him? Of course not. Nor does a parent or grandparent need to be perfect or sinless for us to respect him or her, or to honour the timeless principles that Jesus Himself reinforced repeatedly. Yet there are cults in our own communities that are happy to sever God-given relationships with a ruthlessness that matches the description Paul gave in Romans 1:31 above.

Irrespective of the convictions of these false teachers, parents remain parents all their lives. It is a God-given relationship that cannot be cancelled or violated by the twisted thinking of men.

Note that the sins of malice, heartlessness, haughtiness and ruthlessness are included along with “murder” (vs 29). Just in case someone wants to trivialise them and say they do not compare with other sins a person might commit.

Have they also considered that character assassination is the destroying of another person’s reputation? It is a murder of a more personal kind.

And how else does one justify destroying a person’s standing in the church, except by magnifying that person’s “sins” and assassinating his or her character before the congregation? Yet, in so doing, these false teachers not only usurp the role of God as Judge, but they also deny their own sinful nature by pretending that somehow the offender’s sin is far greater than their own. The apostle John says they deceive themselves, 1 John 1:5-10.

Again, there is not one Scripture that these false teachers can turn to honestly to justify their ungodly and unrighteous behaviour. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:32, “*Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*”

So, the next time “the church”, or the self-righteous one who troubles the church, wants to destroy someone’s character and insists on publicly humiliating that person by “disfellowshipping” him or her, let’s remember the words of Paul in Galatians 6:1, “*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*”

There is certainly nothing “gentle” about cutting a person off from his or her family or from the broader congregation of God’s people, and there is nothing “loving” about destroying a

person's reputation before others to justify violating his or her standing as a brother or sister in Christ.

Even Paul, with his intimate knowledge of God's Word and his direct authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, always wanted to use his abilities *"for building up and not for tearing down"* (2 Corinthians 13:10).

**Two more questions come to mind as we consider this practice of "disfellowshipping" ...**

Firstly, Without Scriptural direction, how do these false teachers determine which sins are worthy of disfellowshipping someone and which sins they will sweep under the carpet?

Secondly, How can Christians reach out with Christ's message of forgiveness and redemption to a lost world, if they excommunicate or "disfellowship" those they feel have "sinned badly" around them and refuse to communicate with them, especially when forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel message and there is absolutely no evidence that the group has any intention of ever forgiving the person or persons they have accused? Even people "in the world", outside the church, can see the double standard that this generates. "What hypocrites", they say, "when they cannot even forgive one another."

**These questions have perplexed me for many years.**

When I consider the fervour with which some folk cast judgement and condemnation at others, I simply cannot harmonise their understanding with the teachings of Christ. And it seems that some folk like to put various sins in different baskets. Yet, sin is sin. Their gossiping, for example, is no less unrighteous than another's drunkenness. Their tale-bearing is no less unrighteous than another's stealing. Their false testimony is no less unrighteous than another's adultery or murder.

Again, *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*. It is a pretty embracing statement. In the end, God will judge everyone according to their deeds (Romans 2:6).

In the meantime, what are we doing with the teachings of Christ? Are we overlooking the sins we consider "less terrible", while condemning those that we think are "serious"?

**Fortunately, the Christ who came down from heaven and took on the form of a baby in a manger, came to reach out to sinners like you and me.**

The angel said to the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, *"Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."*

John 3:16-17 reads, *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."*

The gospel writer Luke recorded Jesus' words in Luke 6:37, *"Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven."*

Paul referred to *"the righteous judge"* in his second letter to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 4:8, implying there is only *one* righteous judge. When we judge, we always risk judging wrongly or hastily, but God will judge with impartial and righteous judgement.

If we truly believe that Christ was born to be our Saviour, and is coming back “to judge the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1), then we should be careful how we judge others. Every one of us is a sinner, albeit a saved sinner if we have buried the old man of sin in baptism. Not one of us is so holy or so righteous that we can justly accuse another.

### **The season for peace and goodwill?**

Even in our secular world, Christmas is often referred to as “the season for peace and goodwill”. Yet, for many, it is a time of unresolved conflict and heartache.

As I look back over the year, I see relationships that have blossomed and others that have struggled, and sadly the ones that have struggled are almost all with ones I have loved since the day they were born, yet there ought to be no reason for that sadness.

Let’s make this the season for forgiveness and building positive, healthy relationships with one another. Let’s focus on the wholesome teachings of Christ and His apostles and take charge of our own faith instead of relying on others who may not really know the Word as well as they should.

If something has separated us, let’s put aside the pride and misgivings of human thinking, deny the false teachings of men who seek to keep us apart, and embrace one another again as we used to do.

If this message has touched your heart or stirred your desire to serve God better, why not join us each Sunday morning via Zoom (Meeting ID 287 359 2166), at 9:20 for a 9:30 start, as we worship together and explore the teachings of Christ.

May this Christmas/New Year season bring you good health and happiness, and the assurance that we have a wonderful God who cares for each one of us...



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*For Christians Following in the Footprints of Jesus*

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