Real Christians…

Late last summer when Bonnie and I were racing home from a vacation in Myrtle Beach, SC ahead of Hurricane Dorian, I saw an interesting billboard. It read: Real Christians…Forgive Like Jesus. Now, I've seen lots of religiously- oriented billboards over the years, and frankly, many of them make me cringe, but this one caught my attention. It was certainly biblical. In the prayer that Jesus taught us, we ask for God's forgiveness as we forgive one another, and Paul calls all Christians to forgiveness. I also liked that the sign put following Jesus in a positive light. Most people want to be thought of as forgiving, I think.

Not too many miles later, I saw another sign. "Real Christians…Love Their Enemies." Again, I was intrigued. It was Jesus himself who called his followers to love their enemies, something that is extraordinarily difficult to do. Yet here was a billboard announcing to the world that real Christians love their enemies! That's a pretty high standard.

Upon entering Virginia, I saw a third billboard. "Real Christians…Obey Jesus' Teachings." Hmmm. This one kind of sums up the other two, doesn't it? And it caused me to think a little bit about what other teachings of Jesus might be included on billboards. Real Christians…give sacrificially to the poor? Turn away from anything that causes sexual lust? Keep their anger under control? Avoid divorce?

Refrain from judging others? Or, visit people in prison? I was starting to

lose my vacation glow!

I liked the fact that these billboards were portraying a positive view of

what it means to follow Christ. I'm afraid that many people out there have

negative views of Christians after the widespread publicity of sexual abuse

among Roman Catholic priests, financial scandals among some

evangelical ministries, and all sorts of lesser hypocrisies from rank and file

Christians. I appreciated a positive counter message to the often-heard

messages criticizing Christians!

But as I reflected on these billboards later, I wondered whether it was

fair to judge if someone was a real Christian based on how they act, as

these signs seem to do. But I thought immediately of a couple biblical

passages that seem to support that idea. Jesus himself said this, ^{15}"*If you

love me, you will keep my commandments.* (John 14:15) That seems

pretty straightforward, doesn't it? The Apostle Paul says something similar,

^{17}*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has

passed away; see, everything has become new!* (II Cor. 5:17) Some of you

may remember that I preached a series of sermons on this short verse. It's

pretty clear in stating that if <u>anyone</u> is in Christ, their life changes

dramatically. And there are literally dozens of other places we could turn in

the Bible that tell us that the lives of those who follow Jesus should be

different from those who do not. So, judging the genuineness of

someone's commitment to Jesus based on how they act seems fair.

However, two questions come to mind when we attempt to do this.

First, how closely does someone need to follow Jesus' teachings in order to

be considered a "real Christian?" What about someone who follows some

of Jesus' commandments, but not all of them? Can they still be a "real

Christian?" Or, what if you try to follow all of his teaching, but fail

sometimes or a lot of the time? Can you still be a "real Christian" then?

What's the threshold? That's the kind of question you're stuck with when

you try to define who a "real Christian" is by how they act.

A second question is this: Doesn't belief and faith also come into

play in assessing if someone is a "real Christian?" After all, faith plays a

big role in the Bible. Recall what might be the best-known verse in the

Bible, a verse you will probably see on a Super Bowl broadcast tonight!

[16]For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone

who <u>believes</u> in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

The focus here is on <u>believing</u> in Jesus.

Or, how about this verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church,

[8]For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own

doing; it is the gift of God— [9]not the result of works, so that no one may

boast. (Eph. 2:8,9) Here, Paul clearly states that we come into right

relationship with God through our faith in the grace that God has offered us through Christ. He says specifically that we are not saved by our works, by our good deeds. According to Paul, genuine Christians are those who put their trust in Jesus as their Savior. This was the emphasis of Martin Luther and all the Protestant Reformers, by the way. And they found this Good News to be liberating. It meant that they didn't have to continually keep track of their good and bad deeds, fearing that God would turn against them if they committed the wrong sins or too many of them! Paul says that God has already accomplished our salvation through the gift of his Son, Jesus. We simply accept that gift by faith.

A man name Jim was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly, he slipped and fell over the edge of a cliff. As he was falling, he grabbed onto a branch growing out from the side of the cliff. He immediately called for help!

Jim: Is anyone up there?

Voice: Yes, I'm here!

Jim: Who's that?

Voice: The Lord.

Jim: Lord, help me.

Voice: Do you trust me?

Jim: I trust you completely, Lord.

Voice: Good. Let go of the branch.

Jim: What???

Voice: I said, "Let go of the branch." (To which Jim replied-)

Jim: Is anybody else up there?

Like Jim, it's hard for us to let go of trusting in our good deeds to get us into God's favor, and instead trust God's offer of salvation. But that's what Paul says we must do. Have you done that? I hope so!

So, it seems that real Christians trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, doesn't it? But does that mean they don't need to follow Jesus' teachings? That it's OK to act like a bunch of hypocrites?

No, of course not! You see, this isn't an either/or situation! Genuine Christians both believe in Jesus as their Savior, and follow and obey his teaching. We often say that a Christian is someone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. We've just talked about the Savior part when we talked about being saved from our sins. The "Lord" part has to do with obeying his teaching and commandments, doing the things mentioned on those billboards.

But the reality is that none of us do that perfectly. Not even the Apostle Paul! Listen to these words from Romans 7. *21So I find it to be a*

law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. [22]For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, [23]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. [24]Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? [25]Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:21-25a)

I would say that if Paul the Apostle continued to wrestle with doing Jesus' will in his life, we will probably have the same struggles! But we should be making some progress! So, when I think back to those billboards, I wouldn't disagree that real Christians forgive like Jesus, love their enemies, and obey Jesus' teachings. That is absolutely true, and it sure holds our feet to the fire! But I would add that genuine Christians trust in Jesus as their Savior, and that we are works in progress, sometimes living up to our calling as his followers and sometimes failing to do so.

Are you a real Christian? Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? If not, maybe it's time.