

I'm O.K. Without Being a Christian • John 10:10

There are many reasons why people choose not to become Christians — some because of ignorance, some because of intellectual objections. There are those who say, “Well, I’m not a Christian because the Bible is so full of contradictions and so many Christians are hypocrites. I don’t want to be like that.” And others say, “How could a good God allow all of the suffering that obviously occurs within our world?” Someone else adds, “Well, what I don’t like is this whole notion that Jesus Christ is the only way that there is to God.” The list goes on and on.

However, there is a top reason that probably describes more Americans than all of the rest of the other reasons combined. It may not always be spoken out loud, but it’s deeply felt. It’s the sense that I’m okay as I am. I’m okay without being a Christian; I’m just fine. Everything is going well. There is nothing that I cannot handle. My life is actually pretty good and very busy. Too busy for religion or church or God. And it’s not that I’m putting someone else down. It’s okay for other people — if they want to be devout Christians, that’s fine, but honestly, I don’t feel the need for it.

Some years ago, Wooddale Church engaged a marketing company to do some research for us of the people who live in this general area. One of the questions that was asked particularly targeted those who were not Christians and those who were unchurched. It asked how long in time you would be willing to drive to a church that could meet your needs. On the telephone questionnaire there was another question, initially not related or at least we had not anticipated the relationship. This one asked what are the greatest needs you face or that you perceive that those most familiar to you are currently facing? Then the researcher ran a series of computer correlations between these questions and the results were interesting. Those who faced severe problems like unemployment, great illness, divorce or some other break-up of a relationship — those who were hurting the most — indicated that they were willing to drive up to several hours each way to a church that could help them meet their needs. By contrast, people who had good homes, adequate money, fine jobs, happy marriages — people for whom everything in life seemed to be going pretty well — indicated that

they would prefer a church that was within walking distance (in case they ever decided to go!)

The conclusion of these correlations was rather obvious. People who feel that everything is okay without being Christians are not going to seriously consider God or a personal relationship with Jesus Christ unless a significant crisis or difficulty comes into their lives. And it has to be one that they think cannot be handled without the help of God.

So what do we say to people who are satisfied with the way things are without being Christians, who are content with their own self-sufficiency? What do we say that Christianity really has to offer? I know that the answers could be many, but consider a short list of four.

First on that list is Christianity’s values and morals. Even if a person does not want to become a Christian, almost everyone has some type of standard or statement of morality and ethics. Even those who would refuse to ever take the label of Christian will acknowledge that Jesus Christ and the Bible present probably the highest ethical standard that humankind has ever considered. The Ten Commandments are a good example — to tell the truth, to preserve and not take human life, to not steal, to honor marriage commitments and not commit adultery, to honor father and mother. Or take the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers.” To love your neighbors, even if they are your enemy, to pray for

those who hate and persecute you, to give to the needy — what an astonishingly high and wonderful view of the way things should be and could be, if all of the

world were to operate by those moral values.

Perhaps the greatest ethical standard that was ever spoken came from the mouth of Jesus. We often refer to it as the Golden Rule, although that is a nickname that was not given to it from the Bible. It was Jesus who said in Matthew 7:12, “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”

We all have to decide by what morality we will live. Some choose a very high standard of ethics and values, others choose for themselves a comparatively low standard. But frankly, there are no better values and there are no higher values than

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those of Christianity. In fact, even people who would choose not to be Christians many times would say that they will try to live by the moral standards and the integrity of the Bible and of Jesus Christ. So then, for any who desire the very best life possible, I would invite them to the values and morals of Jesus Christ in the Bible.

Second on this short list of considerations is the permanent relationship that comes from being a Christian. I think that it's safe to say that we all desire lasting relationships. We all want to be connected. Everyone of us has the desire to be needed and to need others. We want to be known. We like it when other people know our names, when they know about us, when they know what we like and what we dislike and we want to know other people as well. We want there to be people about whom we know the secrets of life, the idiosyncrasies, the personal distinctives. We acknowledge that if life is without those relationships, life can be difficult indeed.

Children who are not cuddled or held, that are not loved in the early stages of their lives, will often carry emotional and psychological scars throughout the rest of their lives. We know that every September as children go off to school, they are concerned about which teacher they will have and they are concerned about the school bus. They are concerned about which classes they will take and how they will do. But probably for every child the number one item at the top of the "school concerns list" is friends. Will my friends be in my class? Will my friends still like me after the summer? Will I make new friends? Will I be able to keep old friends?

Relationships and friendships are all-important and that comes into adult life as well. We all could probably outline our biographies not in terms of the jobs that we have had or the places that we have lived, but in terms of relationships. Almost all of adult life is spent developing, or servicing or concluding relationships with other people.

Relationships are very important. But human relationships, as you well know, can be very difficult. Relationships can be fragile and disappointing. They can be painful if they do not work out well. Parents who dearly love their children and invest all of their lives in them find that when those children grow up, they move away. They establish lives and relationships of their own and there is a sense of loss. Couples, as much as they have said that they are in love, break up and even the best of relationships is divided by death.

As we followed the news of the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, we listened to the commentators on television trying to figure out what exactly was going on. Why were so many hundreds of millions of people so engaged and so deeply touched by the lives and the deaths of these famous women whom they had never met?

For many, it was all because of a relationship, a sense of connection to compassion — a sense that here were vulnerable people, real people, people that had pieces of their lives that were similar to pieces of our lives. Even though there was never a formal greeting or meeting, there was that sense that a car crash and a heart attack had ripped apart a relationship that was very important. For those who are limited to human relationships, the inevitable conclusion is that they have been left alone.

Sooner or later, for one reason or another, every human relationship comes to a conclusion. That means that ultimately the best of human relationships can leave us lonely and isolated and frightened and we don't want that. We have this deep need for connection and intimacy and it is a scary thing to imagine that at some point we would lose what we count to be so all important. That is why for Christians there is such an important and an eternal difference. It is that we can have that kind of personal relationship with God Himself.

God is quoted in Hebrews 13:5, saying, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Matthew 28:20 quotes Jesus saying, "I am with you always." That is to say that, as Christians, we can have a relationship with God that, even when He knows the worst about us, He does not break off the connection nor cease to love us. Not even death itself can steal the most important relationship of all and that is the relationship that we have with God. Even when others may fail us or divorce us or leave us through death, God remains close. In fact, for Christians, through His Holy Spirit we have God Himself inside of us, indwelling every disciple of Jesus Christ. It convinces me that one of the very best reasons to become and be a Christian is this supernatural assurance that we will never ever be alone again.

Third on the list, is purpose for life. We all need a reason to live, otherwise life becomes either ultimately selfish or completely meaningless. Now, of course, there are millions of people who are not Christians who have reasons for life. You can go through a bookstore and you can purchase a broad array of books that will help you define your purpose in life, write a purpose statement or develop a

strategy and how to go about it. They frequently top the best seller list. The variety is endless.

There are some who would say, “My purpose in life is to make and keep money” and others would say, “That is so selfish. My purpose in life is to have and to raise children and therefore to reach into generations that are beyond myself. My children are everything in my life.” Others would say, if they admit it, “I’d like to be famous and powerful. There is all this downside about celebrities, but my goal in life is to be a celebrity.” For others it’s a very physical thing — it’s being in good shape, it’s being terrific looking, it’s being well dressed and turning other people’s eyes. For many it’s to have fun. They think it would be terrific at the end of life to be able to say, “I had a good time; it was great!” For those who are more generous, it is to live for others. It is to do good.

But the difference, the advantage to being a Christian, is that purpose in life is tied to God Himself. To be a Christian is to live for God’s purposes, to live for God’s pleasure. It is to work for something and for Someone who is infinitely bigger than ourselves. It is that wonderful sense of purpose that we can leave a mark on all of eternity and not be limited to the number of years between our birth and death.

When presidents reach their last term in office they think increasingly about how they’ll be understood by history, the mark that they’ll leave. At this point in his career a president will often decide on the signing of a bill, not so much in terms of the opinion of Congress or the polls, but how will this make a difference, five, ten or fifty years out? How will historians not yet born interpret me to some generation a century from now in terms of the difference I made for the history of my country?

I think there is a bit of that in all of us. We would like to have an immortality that leaves a mark beyond our lifetime. For Christians, that desire is fulfilled in God. Throughout the Bible there are multiple calls for us to make a difference as God’s servants in shaping eternal history. It is an amazing and wonderful thing that we become, as Christians, the agents of God. While we may not be famous to people very far away, in our places of employment and in our neighborhoods and homes we are actually representing God in the shaping of this piece of our world. In this piece of history we are the implementers of the will of God. We are being recorded in the history books of heaven

for the difference we make. Now for me, at least, that gives an enormous sense of importance. It gives me an incredible sense of self-worth to be able to say that I live to serve God. I am really making a difference because I am a Christian — a difference that will last forever, with rewards not necessarily of this lifetime. As Christians we will receive awards in heaven that will far exceed the highest accolades of life here on earth.

Jesus put all this together in a couple of statements in Matthew 6. He said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” In other words, where it lasts forever. Jesus also said to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. When we do that, all of the other things that are temporal and that non-Christians may consider to be most important will automatically be cared for by God as well. We’ve often been reminded that when life comes to an end that we “can’t take it with us.” Whether a princess or a pauper, you cannot take your wealth or title or home or any other possession with you when you die. It can be a tragic thing to waste all of life on things that in fact will not last. How much better to have a purpose in life so that at the end of life you can say, “I lived for God and what I did really counted forever.”

Almost half a century ago, a young missionary in South America named Jim Elliott, was killed. Sometime before he died he wrote a statement in his journal that has often been quoted. He summed up this business of purpose of life when he said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” That is so insightful. So much of what we

have now, what difference does it make if we lose it if we can keep what cannot be lost? Purpose in life is one of the truly great reasons to be a Christian.

But there is a reason that tops them all — has more weight than all the rest of them combined. It is the last on this short list and it’s eternal life. For to be a Christian means living forever and to not be a Christian means dying forever.

At the end of John chapter 3 there is a statement that is kind of uncomfortable; I admit that it’s uncomfortable, so I’ll just read it slowly and let us try and get the point. John 3:36 says, “Whoever

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believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." That is then to say, that to be a Christian is to be guaranteed eternal life and to not be a Christian is to choose death and the wrath of God.

What it really comes down to isn't so much a matter of being okay without being a Christian when life is going well. It comes down to the eternal value of being a Christian when life comes to an end.

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television, but have you actually watched someone die? I have. I have seen Christians die and I've seen non-Christians die and it appears to me that there is a very dramatic contrast, far more than I have words to describe. Those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who know that they have eternal life, they die differently. They really do. They die with a peace and a certainty that is nothing short of supernatural. It is an amazing thing to witness. But by unfortunate contrast, those who die without hope, without certainty, without eternal life, are hopeless. It is just not something you want to see.

Now I know that there are many people who say, "Well, I kind of agree with all this. The way I figure it, there are some things I want to do and take care of right now but at some point I really want to get serious with God and be genuine in my commitment to Jesus Christ. I would like to be considered a devout follower of Him, but I'll get to it." There is a danger to that. The obvious danger is that we don't know when we are going to die. All any of us need to do is to pick up today's newspaper or turn on any radio or television news show and we will be vividly reminded that we can be suddenly surprised by death. It is not a wise thing to imagine that we will live a long time.

There is a more subtle matter to consider as well, and that is that the older that we get, the less likely that we are to change. We know, for example, that people who come to faith in Jesus Christ are most likely to do so as children. The percentages drop significantly when a person becomes an adult. By the time someone is in his or her thirties, forties or

fifties it is not very likely that change will take place and the percentages are extremely small by the time someone is in his or her sixties, seventies or eighties. Frankly, not being a Christian becomes a habit. I heard recently that if you want to make something a habit, you need to stick with whatever that discipline may be for about two months. For a majority of people, doing the same thing every day consistently for two months will go a long way to establishing that as a habit for life. To take more than two months and repeatedly choose not to be a Christian and say, "I'm okay with the way my life is," is a major step towards developing a habit that will last a lifetime.

The far better way is to live every day with the confidence of the Christian.

The confidence in faith that not even death itself can take away eternal life. To be able to say with St. Paul that if I live, then I will live for Jesus Christ and if I die, well, then I'll die and go to heaven to be with Jesus Christ which will be far better. I'm convinced that to have eternal life is the very best reason to be a Christian. And it is the reason that lasts forever.

An old friend of mine got to thinking about a woman who was a high school classmate of his and he decided to write her a letter, for his experiences with her indicated to him that she was not a Christian. As I recall, he said he wrote and rewrote until he sensed that he had gotten his long letter just exactly right. The letter was designed to persuade her that she was not okay not being a Christian. It was to try and persuade her to come to faith in Jesus Christ. He mailed the letter and waited for her response.

Several weeks later he received a very short note back from her. It said, "Dear Dick, Go to hell.

Carol." Now, obviously she did not think that she wanted to become a Christian. She thought she was okay the way she

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was. In my experience, most people are not as antagonistic as that. Most of us are just busy — busy and probably doing pretty well.

But it really isn't okay not to be a Christian. It is missing out on the very best. How much better it is, how wonderful because of the values and the morals of Jesus Christ in the Bible, to be a Christian. How good it is because of the permanent rela-

tionship that we can have with God through Jesus Christ, a relationship that lasts through everything and lasts forever. How good it is to have a purpose in life so I know why I'm here and I know what I'm suppose to do. I know that my life will make a difference that lasts forever. And how very good it is to have eternal life, to know for certain because God says so. So that whether I die today or I live to a very old age — when that time comes I can have an unexplainable peace that takes me simply through a transition from this life to a life that lasts forever with Him. It means that to be a Christian is the very best that there is to be.

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