Defense: Christians are Narrow-Minded Hypocrites Memory Verse: Matthew 7:14

July 13th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:1-6; 13-14

**[SLIDE 1]**

 I came across an interesting question recently and I wanted to pose it here today. The question is, if you could sum up Jesus in just one word, what would it be? This is, of course, a challenge and there is probably no definitive right answer, but I want you to at least keep the question in mind as we dive in today.

We have come a long way in our apologetic journey through this series. We began with the question of God’s existence and pointed out that modern scientific advancements actually demonstrate the incredibly complex design of nature. We talked about the Bible and how it is trustworthy and historically accurate. Then we tackled the big questions: If God is good, why does evil exist? And if God is love, how can he send people to hell? We discussed miracles, specifically Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and we also looked at why he had to die in the first place. We have covered a lot of ground in the past couple of months. We talked about a lot of information, some of it historical, some of it philosophical. I have tried to clarify some of the bedrock doctrine of the Christian faith, but today marks a bit of a shift in focus. Today we are not talking so much about Christian teachings or beliefs, but we are talking about Christians themselves. You and me. I think we are all aware that, in the eyes of this world, Christians are not always well received. Some might even categorize us as **[SLIDE 2]** “narrow-minded hypocrites.” How many of you have heard that title before?

 Now I want to be careful today that I am not just addressing a straw man. It’s possible that some Christians have developed a bit of a victim mindset in which they see unbelievers in their lives labeling them in unfair ways. They feel like they are the target of unfair treatment. It might be the case that people do not like me because of my faith, but I might also exaggerate their sentiments; that is possible too.

 In general, people tend to be willing to co-exist with people of other faiths. In many contexts, the work place for example, we do not have a choice. But tolerance is not acceptance. And when it comes down to the content of what Christians believe, it does not take long for the terms “narrow-minded” and “hypocrite” to emerge. I think if the average non-believer were pressed to give a description of Christians they know, they would land on something like these two terms. And I have a theory as to why people might conclude that we are narrow-minded and hypocritical…it’s because it’s true.

 Let me unpack what I mean **[SLIDE 3]**….((We live in a free country. As a citizen of the United States and am allowed to make my own path in life. I can go on to higher education or not. I could work in a career of my choosing. I could live here or move away and live somewhere else. The old slogan applies here, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. But sometimes choices can be paralyzing. We are free technically, but we are not sure what to do or where to go. It’s like walking into the **[SLIDE 4]** ice cream shop, seeing dozens of flavors available and then having to pick which one you’d like to eat. The freedom is overwhelming. I think it is fair to say that in the freedom granted us in this life, we all could use a little guidance.

 To me, that’s where the **[SLIDE 5]** bible comes in. We have a way to live outlined for us in God’s word and demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus. Sure, we will all come to certain points in which we feel stumped and unsure what choice is the best choice, but overall, God has given us a guide book, a way to navigate freedom.)) So, if I faithfully adhere to scripture in my life, if I, for example, am serious about living according to the ten commandments, then I am going to stand out from the culture around me. I will seem a bit odd. I won’t use course language or use Jesus name as an expletive. I won’t try to sleep around, I won’t fixate on what others have, I will be sure to attend worship on my day off, I won’t be found lying or speaking falsely about someone else. **[SLIDE 6]** If I live according to these mandates, then, by definition, my behavior has been narrowed. I am technically free to do whatever I want, but my faith dictates that a totally free life is not the best life. I am better off prohibiting certain things, limited certain behaviors and living a more narrow way. Our memory verse this week fills us in. Let me read **[SLIDE 7]** Matthew 7 verse 13 and 14: “Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.” We see here the difference between the broad and the narrow is **[SLIDE 8]** destruction and life. Jesus is very clear here about which we ought to prefer.

 **[SLIDE 9]** But walking the narrow path is not so easy to do. We just read, “ the road is difficult”. Living differently sets you apart. And we get into trouble when other people start to feel like we are telling them how to live their lives. If we do that, then we are infringing on their freedom. People generally don’t like being told what to do. And so, we get accused of being narrow-minded since we uphold one way, a narrow way, over all other options.

 But there is a gift in narrowness. **[SLIDE 10]** Take my guitar for example. I have all the freedom in the world to drive to the music store and buy a guitar. And once I have it, I am free to play it whenever I want, however I want. I could play blues licks, or hard rock riffs, or folk music or worship songs. This guitar belongs to me. I can take it where I want and use it how I see fit. But this guitar was made for a specific purpose. If I want to make good use of this guitar, I need to take a few lessons and learn how to use it properly. I have the freedom to do whatever I want. I could play the guitar like this (strum it backwards) or like that (stum it behind head), but it is not going to work well. I could play it as some sort of drum but, everyone agrees, that is missing something. If I want to use this instrument in the way that it was designed to be used, then I need to learn how to hold my fingers to make chords, I have to learn what all the notes are on the neck. I have to learn about strumming and rhythm. These lessons are very restricting. Guitar lessons provided a very, very narrow view. You are literally looking at one note at a time, one chord at a time, one song at a time. But what does freedom on the guitar look like? Maybe something like this: **[SLIDE 11]** (VIDEO: Tommy Emmanuel *Amazing Grace* stop at 1:35).

 **[SLIDE 12]** This guitar player is Tommy Emmanuel. He is a legend on the instrument, and you can see why. He can take a simple hymn and add any flourish that comes to his mind. When it comes to the guitar, Tommy is a free man. But I want you to notice a few things from this video. One; look at this guitar. You might be thinking, why doesn’t he get a new one already! But think of the sheer hours put into this instrument. For Tommy, this particular guitar is like an appendage of his own body. He is so familiar with the way this guitar feels, he wouldn’t want to part with it. And all the time invested allows for my second observation…Tommy can just enjoy the music. He is not focused on the individual notes, he is caught up in the song. He is not staring at his fingers or worried about tempo or hitting the wrong string. He is free to enjoy the music.

 But how did Tommy achieve this freedom? Through the narrowness of lessons, the narrowness of notation, the narrowness of rehearsing the same thing over and over again. Tommy gets to be free on the guitar because he has walked through the narrow way of instruction. **[SLIDE 13]** Freedom is not about having all the options available to you, freedom is about **[slide 14]**  knowing what to do with those options. When we walk through the narrow way of God’s instruction, we can come to a place where we enjoy life. We don’t have to focus on the menial aspects all the time because, by God’s grace, we have mastered the basics. Now, we can enjoy life, we can live it out its intended purpose. The Westminster Catechism from the 1600’s stills sums it up well: The purpose of this life is **[SLIDE 15]** “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” I have the impression that Tommy Emmanuel could play on the guitar forever, he seems to enjoy it so much. Can we say the same for our relationship with the Lord? Do we enjoy him so much that we would never want to part? If you feel that you could stand to experience more joy in your relationship with God, I encourage you to spend some time. Invest into that relationship and you will learn how to enjoy life with our gracious God.

 So yes, we Christians are narrow, but for good reason. The narrowness of our training ground does not squash freedom, rather it enhances it. We can enjoy freedom so much more when we know how to wield it and use it for its intended purpose.

 But what about this notion of **[SLIDE 16]** hypocrisy? Jesus’ worst enemies were not the soldiers who killed him, they were the Jewish leaders, the Bible experts, the ones who claimed to be so wise. Jesus saves his harshest words for these Pharisees a.k.a. church people. Jesus unleashed on them in Matthew 23. In the first part of the chapter, we need to take note of what they are being accused of so we can avoid such hypocrisy in our own lives.

 **[SLIDE 17]** Jesus tells the crowds in verse 3, that when it comes to the Pharisees, do what they say, but don’t do what they do. So apparently, they talk a good game, they seem to have the right answers, but they fail to walk the talk. In verse 4 Jesus says they tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry and put them on the shoulders of others, but refuse to carry these burdens themselves. Verse 5 and 6, they live to be noticed by others, they make a show of their prayers. They love to be honored, and they relish the title “Rabbi” which means teacher. They wanted to be seen as the smartest person in the room.

 The basic problem here is that these experts and leaders loved power and status. And they loved power and status more than they loved God or people. The Romans for example, they never pretended to love people. A Roman soldier did his duty. What you saw is what you got. He may have done some bad things in his role as a soldier, but he was not hypocritical about it. A blind beggar on the side of the road, or an outcast with leprosy or a poor widow trying to get by, these people did not have the luxury of hypocrisy. They lived as open books, honest and unable to cover up their shortcomings. Jesus took issue with the church people, the Pharisees, the teachers, the so-called experts.

 Throughout the rest of Matthew 23 Jesus repeats the same line six times! He says **[SLIDE 18]** ‘How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites!” Over and over again Jesus excoriates these leaders for their pretention and posturing. We said a few months back that hypocrite was the same word used to refer to an actor, someone who played a character, someone who went through scripted motions. This is the charge Jesus brings on these teachers. Everything about them is unauthentic, everything about them reeks of role-playing and rehearsal. Jesus sees through the charade, and Jesus calls it out.

So we can ask ourselves, in our lives, where am I role playing? **[SLIDE 19]** Where am I expecting others to be real when I myself am not? Where am I loving status over people? This is a brutal question to take seriously because anyone with an ounce of self-awareness knows that we are not too far from these Pharisees. We can raise our eyebrows when Jesus goes after them, and we might feel grateful that we are not in the crosshairs at that moment. It’s a lot like seeing one of your siblings getting chewed out by your mom and dad. “Glad that’s not me!” But surely, we can all understand how easily it could be us. Hypocrisy is not something to point out in others…it is something we need to be aware of in our own selves.

 If someone accuses us of hypocrisy, we can defend ourselves, we can point out the other person’s flaws, we can change the subject, or we can apologize. We can own it. Take the hit and admit that I do not perfectly live out my faith. It’s true, you got me – and I’m sorry. Because when you let them slap you on the cheek and you stand by for another, just like that, you are living out your faith. You are expressing the true humility of Jesus himself. You are letting go of your own self-image and choosing to love God and others.

 Here is the bottom-line that I think we need to embrace: **[SLIDE 20]** Christianity is offensive. Jesus himself is clear about this. He says that we will be hated because we follow him. He says that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. He acknowledged that in this world, we will have trouble. So when the charge is brought against us that we are narrow-minded and hypocritical, we can actually affirm both items. Yes, I am narrow-minded because I value the direction and guidance God’s word provides for me. I don’t have to beat around the bush when it comes to the evils of abortion, I don’t have to consider the endorsing or adopting LGBT ideology, I don’t have to waste my time trying to decide if communism espouses the best policies. I don’t have to pretend that other religions or worldviews are just as valid as Christianity. I can stand upon the Word of God, which narrows my options, but allows me to enjoy freedom as God intended. And as I live out that freedom, I am bound to make mistakes and sometimes slip on the mask of a hypocrite. When I do, I can take the opportunity to stop, apologize, remove my mask, and engage as Jesus would.

 That brings me to my question: If you could sum up Jesus in just one word, what would it be? I think my answer would be **[SLIDE 21]** authentic. Jesus never strayed from the narrowness of truth and he never wore a mask to pretend to be something else. Jesus was authentically God and at the same time, the most authentic human to ever live. He is the way, the truth and the life and he never apologized for it. We follow a narrow way, and sometimes we fake it. But we must not let our culture or our world deter us from our calling simply because they have a few names they want to call us. We are Christians. We live by the guidance of God’s word and we strive to be authentic, just like Jesus. Amen.