

Mark 10:17–22 (NRSV)

¹⁷ As he [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Revelation 3:14–22 (NRSV)

¹⁴ “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

¹⁵ “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

*Does my heart cry out “My God and my all? Am I happy in God?
Am I an Altogether Christian?”*

Christianish. You’ve probably never heard or seen the word before. There’s a good reason; it is a “made-up” word. So, the question is what exactly do we mean by it? This is what we’ll be exploring in the next few weeks. But rather than starting with a definition, assuming I could even devise one, I want to begin with some stories.

John Wesley

After getting his B.A. from Oxford in 1724, Wesley pursued ordination in the Church of England. A couple of years later he had earned a Master’s degree and was ordained an Anglican priest. He was offered a position at Oxford, which he took up after spending a couple of years assisting his father.

At Oxford, Wesley’s life took an increasingly spiritual turn. When his younger brother, Charles, arrived at Oxford, John began to establish so-called Holy Clubs. These were akin to covenant groups in which the group members held one another accountable for their way of life. These groups were devout and self-disciplined, methodical in all things, hence the nickname “methodists” that became attached to them.

In 1735, John followed his brother to the Georgia colony to work as a missionary. He spent 18 months there. His experience was a mixed bag at best, and John headed home after a minor scandal erupted over his refusal to serve Communion to a young woman who he felt had wronged him.

Wesley was self-disciplined and introspective. By the time he got back to England he was in his mid-thirties and a troubled man. John had always pushed himself and others hard in his ministerial work. From all appearances, he was a man of strong faith, deeply committed to doing the work of his Lord. But John knew otherwise; he lacked self-assurance about where he stood with God. When looking back on his early years in ministry, Wesley would say that he had spent many years fruitlessly striving to make himself right with God.

On the voyage to America, John had been deeply affected by the faith he saw in a band of Moravian Christians, even as the ship seemed it would be lost in a severe storm. These Moravians seemed at peace through it all. Whatever it was that John saw in them, he wanted it. His experience with them only made more stark what he felt he was missing in his own heart.

The turning point in John's life came back in London on a spring evening. He went to a Moravian Society meeting and heard a sermon preached on Paul's letter to the Romans. It was May 24, 1738. By this time he was 35 and an experienced Anglican priest.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Jesus Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ; Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

What did this strange warming mean? Had John not even been a Christian before that evening? That seems like a crazy idea? Or was it just a spiritual awakening to a salvation that was already his, a renewing of God's Spirit in John's heart?

How could anyone really know the answers to such questions? To this day, interpreters of Wesley disagree even about how John understood what had happened to him. And, frankly, Wesley himself is the reason for this uncertainty. At times, he seemed to think that he hadn't even been a Christian before that evening. At other times, particularly as the years rolled on, he would see the Aldersgate experience as a profound step on a long journey of faith. The answer to this question is, of course, something that only God knows.

My own story

Today's passage from Revelation hits my heart hard every time I read it. You see, I know that I spent much of my adult life as a Laodicean Christian; the letter could have been written to me. I went to church much of the time, sang in choir a lot, and taught Sunday School now and then. I even preached at a small Methodist church in Ohio.

But the truth is that I was lukewarm, just like the Christians in Laodicea. I would have told someone that I believed in Jesus and even been able to spout some smart-sounding theology, but I was really indifferent to the whole thing. I could take care of my own needs quite well . . . or so I thought. Sadly, I didn't realize all this at the time. It is only by looking back from my new life in Christ that I can see my tepid faith for what it was.

In my late forties, I was in a rough place. I hadn't even been to church regularly for five years. Just too busy. Too much to do. But after my divorce, I actually fell on my knees and prayed. The number of times I'd voluntarily done that in my life could have been counted on one hand (maybe one finger!).

And God moved in my life with great power. I can't point to a single evening, a la Wesley, but I can point to a period of a few months. Can I explain it? No. Can I even articulate well what happened? No. All I know is I'm a different man on this side of that time than I was before.

I grew up in the church. So was I a Christian all my life and had just drifted away for awhile? Or had I never really had authentic faith in Christ? *Beats me*. I don't know. If you tried to pin me down, my answer would depend on the day you asked me. Like Wesley, I blow both ways on this. And like Wesley, only God knows the answers to such questions.

The “Almost” Christian

About three years after his Aldersgate experience, John Wesley delivered one of his most famous sermons, “The Almost Christian.” Wesley saw himself as having gone from what he called an “almost” Christian to an “altogether” Christian.

In the sermon, Wesley set forth, at some length, a description of what he meant by “almost” Christian, drawn from his own experience. An “almost Christian” was someone who has all the outward trappings of a Christian, but lacks the heart.

Let’s think about that for a moment. For Wesley, an “almost Christian” is not a matter of what anyone could see or observe or evaluate. By *all outward appearances*, Wesley himself had a deep and profound faith in and love for Christ long *before* Aldersgate. But Wesley knew differently. Perhaps not so much so at the time, but certainly looking back post-Aldersgate. Like Wesley, I too can see the truth more clearly by looking back. My minimalist faith was anything but profound or deep or passionate.

Wesley’s life-changing insight was that our relationship with God is a matter of the heart. It is crucial we remember this, for no one can judge the state of another person’s heart. Goodness, we have enough trouble with understanding our own hearts, much less someone else’s! The truth is that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

In contrast with the “almost Christian,” Wesley’s “altogether Christian” has “a love for God” and a “love for others.” The “altogether Christian” has faith, the kind of faith that produces “repentance, love, and good works.” These good works don’t lead to faith; they are its consequence. Yes, the “Altogether” Christian believes that our claims about Jesus are true, but there is also “steadfast faith and confidence in Christ to save us from everlasting condemnation.”

“Has God’s love been poured into your heart?,” asks Wesley. “Can you say to him, ‘My God, and my all? Are you happy in God? Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing?’”

Wesley’s questions are not for us to ask others, but for us to ask ourselves. This is not about dividing people into two categories; this is about challenging ourselves, asking ourselves the hard questions. If the questions make us squirm as they do me, so be it. They are the right questions.

Christianish?

We’ve chosen to use the word “*Christianish*” to capture Wesley’s insights into the truth about our relationship with God. So, if I were to ask myself, am I more *Christianish* than Christian, more “almost” than “altogether” I might ask:

- Am I more lukewarm than passionate?
- Am I more of a casual Christian than a committed Christian?
- Does my heart ever cry out: “My God and my all”?
- Do I really trust Jesus? In all things?
- Do I truly love my neighbor as I love myself and as Christ loves me?

You could probably write such questions as well as I can. Here is how James K. A. Smith puts it in the context of Christian education:

“Could it be that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to *think* about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I love *not* the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market?”

This is the problem with the rich man in today’s passage from Mark’s gospel. By all outward appearances he had been a devout and obedient Jew. But Jesus, with one instruction, reveals that the man’s heart belongs to his wealth, his stuff, not to the kingdom of God.

Which is it?

It is no surprise to us that Jesus would prefer the Laodicean Christians to be hot for God, on fire and totally committed, loving God in all things, and working to build for his kingdom. Surely, the creator of all things, the God of love, ought to be the focus of such passion and desire.

But preferring the Laodiceans be cold? Why would Jesus prefer people not know him at all, or even hate him, to simple indifference? My Tuesday class and I have begun a study of John's gospel. For John, when it comes to the question of Jesus there is no middle-ground, no "we'll see," no fence straddling . . . no room for indifference. One believes or one does not. One path leads to the light, the other remains in the darkness. One way leads to life, the other to death. And it is Jesus, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Actually, it all sounds pretty much like Wesley.

The Seven Churches of Revelation

After the opening vision of Christ in the first chapter, John's vision turns to seven letters from Christ to actual churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), one of which is today's letter to the church at Laodicea.

Each of the seven Christian communities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) gets a different message from Jesus. A good exercise is to read each one and ask yourself which letter would be written to your own church. The specifics of the letters aren't always easy to understand, but the thrust of each is clear. The Christians in Smyrna are encouraged in their suffering and poverty. They are rich in what matters. The Philadelphians are encouraged in their patient endurance. Jesus' words to these churches, when laid against the warnings given to the wealthy Laodiceans, reminds us that for 2,000 years, the way of Christ has been marked by suffering, not prosperity.

In John's gospel and in Jesus' message to the Laodiceans, the term "lukewarm Christian," is an oxymoron, it makes no sense. How could someone have genuinely been born from above (John 3), have given their life over to Jesus Christ, and yet be indifferent about the whole thing. At least Jesus knows where he stands with a person who is either hot or cold.

I know that many who come to church are like I once was – present but apathetic, not allowing God into any part of their life beside Sunday morning. A little worship here and there suits them just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it all the way, not just peek through the crack.

More than just me

The challenge set out before the rich man by Jesus. The words of Wesley that make us squirm. The questions about our own hearts. These are not all of this story.

American Christianity is undergoing significant and very real changes that affect us all. We'll move on to some of these larger issues next week, but for now, here are quotes from researchers that

begin Kenda Creasy Dean's recent book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*:

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U. S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious tradition.

Christian Smith with Melinda Denton

I am personally not very much worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity . . . [is] concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor: what kind of Christianity . . . are we talking about.

Douglas John Hall

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Arthur Jones has written the curricula for the *Christianish* Connection Group series. Here are some of the questions the groups will be talking about this week:

1. Consider the metaphor of our faith as a picnic where we pick and choose the parts of God that feel comfortable to us.
 - a. Why is it so tempting to take only parts of the faith and invest only parts of ourselves into church?
 - b. What does that say to other Christians? Mahatma Gandhi once said “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.” Does being Christianish turn off non-Christians to God’s love? Who do you know that has been turned off by Christianish?
2. In this world, where we have the ability to choose anything, why would we respond to God’s love through Jesus Christ? Discuss the primary point of the video: “Our own choices may fill us for a while, but sooner or later, a God that we make up – anything less than the true God – gets stale, and old, and cannot sustain us.”
 - a. Have you, or someone you know, ever tried to go through life on a philosophy or a belief that just doesn’t hold up in hard times? What makes the true Christian faith different?
 - b. What are the practices in our lives that make it more likely that we will be filled with the true God rather than our own weak substitute? (In the new vision frame, this is why we emphasize worshipping regularly, connecting with others in small groups and serving or God’s people)
3. God created us and therefore knows us and how we can live the life that he created us to live. Jesus said in John 10:10 “I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly.”
 - a. In light of the conversation, why is it relevant for St. Andrew to call the Christianish to become passionate servants of Christ?
 - b. Keeping in mind that the Christianish is always about ourselves, how might we call ourselves to become servants of the true God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Mark 10:23-31 Jesus teaches his disciples after the visit by the rich man	Tuesday, Matthew 19:16-30 Matthew’s story of the half-hearted rich man
Wednesday, Psalm 51 Create in me a clean heart, O God	Thursday, Luke 14:25-33 Jesus talks about the costs of discipleship. The kingdom of God is no place for half-way measures.
Friday, John 12:1-8 In contrast to the half-hearted rich man, we have the passion of Mary for her Lord.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

