

Is Jesus a Bigot?

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[0 : 0 0] Now I want to go back, I will go back shortly to the reading that Esther had from Matthew's Gospel. But if you are visiting with us today, maybe for the first time, this is part, as I mentioned, of a series that we're doing. Last week it's called Unbelievable, and that's the graphic. Last week we looked at, is Jesus real, and are you hurting in our evening worship?

So today we're looking at, is Jesus a bigot? And in the evening, are you empty? Some of the questions. And then next Sunday morning, which is Easter Sunday, is Jesus good? And then the question, are you hopeless? So we're looking at it kind of from different angles over the next kind of around Easter time. And so that's really where we are and where we're at. And we, I kind of geared it as something for those who maybe are questioning or wondering or skeptical about the Christian faith. Because the reality is, I'll go on to the next slide if I, yeah, a lot of you will have maybe been aware of that poster series that came out.

Many people who think of Jesus, but if not Jesus, certainly Christians, as bigots. And that is probably a common theme that's in our society in many ways today. And so I'm looking at that, I hope I'm looking, I'm going to look at that head on a little bit. By looking at the life and claims of Jesus Himself, I think sometimes the greatest opposition comes from those who have made a lot of assumptions about Jesus and maybe Christians as well, or have had bad experiences maybe of Christians, but who maybe haven't looked quite so much or listened quite so much to the claims of Jesus Himself. And that's a challenge then for us all to listen and to respect those who may be different from us. But this police campaign and government campaign, I think, was generally quite controversial. I wouldn't doubt the motives behind it at all. But the statement that went public, dear bigots, you can't spread your religious hate here end of sermon was pretty powerful. It was a very broad brushed dismissal, really in many ways, of all faiths and of all sermons. So tough today. It was promoting potentially in some ways a rather stereotypical view, and it was at some levels challenged itself on grounds of inciting hate. It's a tad bigoted in some ways. And it seems that it's fighting hate with hate rather than dialogue. And that's never a good thing. It's always an important thing not just to throw out sound bites or something that we can add to social media and to our memes, but to genuinely enter into dialogue where there's disagreement. But it's a very interesting point that is made there, and so I'm going to look at that for a few minutes this morning, and ask the question, is Jesus a bigot? The Cambridge definition of a bigot, Cambridge dictionary, definition of a bigot, is a person who has strong unreasonable beliefs and who does not like other people who have different beliefs or a different way of life. Okay? So that's a bigot. And that is, I would imagine that's the kind of definition we all recognize as being a bigot.

So we're going to look at one or two things about Jesus in the Bible and try and unpack whether he fits into that category of being a bigot. He certainly had strong beliefs.

He definitely had strong beliefs, and particularly he had strong beliefs. Most clearly in the Gospels, the strongest beliefs he had were against religious hypocrisy. That was where Jesus' passion in many ways really spilled over when he was in public. Not just to be honest, not just religious hypocrisy, but any kind of hypocrisy. He really hated any kind of hypocrisy. And we read that, and Esther read that for us. It's an amazing chapter, Matthew chapter 23, it's called The Seven Wows of Jesus, where he almost expresses judgment in seven different ways to the religious leaders of his day who were plotting to have him crucified. And what was enraging him about them, because Jesus, and we haven't looked into the claims of Jesus being the Son of God and being divine, but we're taking that at the moment for granted, he understood them and knew what was in their hearts. And what he knew about them was that they were taking Old Testament teaching and they were twisting it and changing it so that they could wield political power and so they could feel good about themselves and judge other people. They used the misinterpreted Scripture teaching of the Old

Testament to feed their own pride, and he was absolutely brutal. He was brutal in his assessment of them. And we read that in the different verses that we read from

[5 : 54] Matthew 23. He refers to them as uncaring and hypocritical, that they made all kinds of demands of everyone else, but never helped anyone in any way whatsoever to meet these demands that they were making, and that they themselves were, by making such demands, denying their own need of a Savior. He called them in verse 13, blind, well he didn't call them this, but he expressed that they were blind gatekeepers. He says to them, you know, you shut the kingdom of heaven and men's faces, people's faces, but you neither enter yourselves nor allow anyone else to enter. He could see that they didn't accept or believe God's verdict on their own hearts and on their own need, and they even then misdirected other people so that they wouldn't come to know God and to see his forgiveness. They were really, in other words, they were kind of proud moralists, and their argument to each other and to others was, well, we're so good, we're so good, other people will accept, other people might not accept, but God will have to accept me because I do so many good things,

I go to church, I give money to the church, I keep the commands of God and blah, blah, blah, blah, so they went on, and so they believed that therefore God had a duty to accept them as worthy and then into heaven when they died. It was a radical inversion of the Bible teaching and of what Jesus came to do, completely the opposite of what Jesus came to do and what he came to be involved in. And they've provided a foundation for a miserable alternative to the gospel ever since, that we don't really need Jesus, we just need to do our best and that's all that matters. But he goes beyond that and he calls them hellish fanatics in verse 15. It must have been absolutely outrageous to have been there and to have heard these people who were morally upright and religious and the kind of foundational leaders of the day when he says that they go over land and sea to win a single proselyte and when they do you make them twice as much a son of hell as you are. That's pretty strong words, isn't it? Is it strong enough for us? It's really great stuff because he saw that their teaching and their actions actually gave way to division and to hatred and to ugliness. That's why he was so strong in what he was saying because in effect he's exposing their bigotry and he's exposing their dangerous teaching because it led to division and it led to pride and it led to a separation of people one from another. So definition of bigot that we looked at, strong beliefs, yes, he did have strong beliefs, absolutely, especially against religious and other kinds of hypocrisy. Unreasonable? No, because he could see it was leading to division and to hatred and to separation within society. It wasn't unreasonable. Does he not like others because in that definition it speaks about not liking others for their beliefs and for being different? No, that's not the case either because if you look at the last verse of this chapter that we just read a few verses of it, but at the last part of that chapter we've got this remarkable picture of Jesus saying, pleading and crying, he says, oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, and there he was speaking about all the people that he had been damning in some ways by his language, the religious leaders of the day, he said, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who sent it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers the brood under her wings and you were not willing? He's pleading with compassion and with a great love for them and a great sorrow that they don't see and understand and know who God was and why Jesus had come and that they were intent on taking him all the way to the cross. So at that level you can never accuse Jesus of being a bigot. He opposes them, opposes them strongly because he believes it's damaging what they're doing, but he has a great love for them and he wishes to take them in a kind of fatherly, motherly way under his wings and they would accept what he's saying, but yet he will not stand down from what he believes and knows to be the truth.

So that's the first thing we see about the Jesus of the Bible and that's just a very small snippet into who he is, but he also does make many exclusive claims and we can't forget that and I think this is where maybe the claim of bigotry comes in for people when they think about Jesus and what he claims. Jesus answered and he said, I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me. This is very shortly before the passage that Esther read was very shortly before the crucifixion, which is what we remember the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus at this time of year. And this is kind of a pointer towards what he's come to do because many people will argue that crucifixion was just a, you know, it was a, a bearant mistake that it shouldn't have happened, it was just the way it happened. And the leaders all of Jesus or the followers of Jesus after that twisted it around and made it something that was meant to happen and it was good. But

Jesus always had this clear move towards Calvary, towards what was happening. He went willingly and yet he was opposed all the way. And, but he made this exclusive claim that he says, I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, Father God except through me. And that's unique in the world of claims, in the history of anyone's claims. It's not that he taught the way that he said, I can teach you the way. It's not that he claimed to know the truth or that he had some kind of secret of life. He's making the claims for himself. He's saying, I am the way, the truth and the life. He's an incarnation of these things in a sense that the only way that we can get to the Father, to God, to heaven is through Jesus Christ. That's what he taught. That's what he showed himself to be and that's what he came to do through his death on the cross and his resurrection. So he makes a really exclusive claim here for humanity, not just for religious people but for humanity. And he makes exclusive claims right through his ministry. I'm going to look very quickly at three. The first is in his greatest sermon. His greatest sermon that's recorded in the gospel is a sermon on the Mount and we know a lot of people who maybe don't know a lot about Christianity will know about the sermon on the Mount and the ethical teaching of Jesus that comes from it. But the interesting thing about his greatest sermon is the theme of it is our hearts. He says, blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. And it's an interesting thing because nobody can be pure in heart. And he's beginning already in that sermon to point to our need of him and what he can do to transform our heart. In other words, the theme of the sermon, it kind of is ethical, but it also isn't ethical.

[14:13] It's much deeper and much more spiritual. If you could summarize it, you could probably say that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. That's what he's exposing in the sermon on the Mount for everyone he says. And he's, you know, no one comes, he says, to the Father except through me. Now, what he says there, that's the most exclusive, that's the most inclusive statement ever. They talk about the gospel being exclusive, well that's right, but it's also the most inclusive statement that has ever been made.

It's the ultimate leveler, in other words. And he spoke the whole of his ministry about the need of humanity, not about certain people being worse than others or greater sinners than others. He said that the whole of the human race had only one way to get back to God and to the Father, and that was through Jesus Christ. He says it's a universal heart problem that we have, that we evolve by nature, turned away from the living God, the author of life and of love, and therefore we pay the consequences for that. And the sermon, the sermon is a really uncomfortable place to go, the sermon on the Mount Matthew 5 and some of the other references in the gospels, because he takes us, he takes us to the dark places of our hearts, before him, before his purity and his perfection, he exposes really for us our guilt, our brokenness, our lostness, and how limited we are spiritually. He takes us to the places nobody sees, nobody else sees in our lives. You know, but sometimes you spill out into maybe greed or lies or unfaithfulness or pride or selfishness. He kind of exposes that intangible ugliness that polite company doesn't speak about. That's really what he does for us. All the intangible ugliness of which we have both been victims and perpetrators in our lives, if we are going to be brutally honest, quite often speak about the Bible as a mirror, because it is a mirror often into, if we are willing to let it into the hurt and the pain and sometimes the guilt that nobody wants to speak about but we recognize as being there. And he exposes the myth that all that matters is just if we just try our best or be true to ourselves or be religious and do nice things and good things. And that sermon kind of says, look, it doesn't cut it with the living God who wants purity of heart. It doesn't deal with the forsakenness that we have before God.

He's simply not interested in our comparative goodness to other people. And we may be, you know, we may be really good as we compare ourselves to other people. And he's much better than them. Absolutely, we might be much better than the next person. But he says, I'm simply not interested in that. And the great definition of that is what he said to the Pharisees.

They were the most morally upright and good and very commas people in the world, in the ancient era, in the world which he lived. But he says, he actually calls them, at one point he calls them whitewashed tombs. You know, they're named nice and clean on the outside, but they hadn't dealt with their hearts and with the pride and the greed and the selfishness. So there's a great leveler there in the all, it's just equally bad news for everybody. And he also highlights that in his greatest parable. He's a great storyteller and he tells, well, I think it's his greatest parable, it might not be according to other people, but the prodigal son where he tells the story of a son who leaves his father, but who demands his inheritance from his father and spends it all on wild living and then he

has nothing left and he ends up wanting to eat the food that he's feeding the pigs with and he says, I'll go back and be a servant for my dad. And when he goes back, his dad's running towards him with open arms and says, oh, you are dead, but now you're alive again, you were lost and found. It's tremendous and a beautiful story. And again, it's, but what it does do is he's exposing that in his description, he's exposing our condition that we are like thankless children who take all the good gifts from our Father in heaven, but ignore them and don't give thanks and don't respond to him, but take the life that he offers and the pleasures that we get from life and spend all ourselves, but have no reference to our

Father until we see our need and we turn back to Him. It's a hugely significant story. Living without reference to His love as our Father, taking all we can get as if it's ours by right and then finding ourselves in a mess at the end of it, needing to get back to our Heavenly Father. And then of course, in terms of his exclusive claims, not just in the sermon and in that parable, but in his greatest action, greatest sermon, greatest parable, greatest action, probably the most famous verse in the Bible for God so loved the world that He gave His only, one and only Son, whoever bleeds them shall not perish, but have eternal life. And so his greatest action is in response to all that, in response to the bad news of the gospel, the bad news, I guess, of the diagnosis that Jesus Christ says and reminds us that He's the only way back. He's the only way back because He gives Himself, God, the

[20 : 25] Son in His death and resurrection. That's what He says. That's why, you know, it seems a strange thing to do, doesn't it, to sing about someone's death from a long time ago? It's a bizarre kind of thing that we do. We take it for granted. I bet none of the Christians here thought anything of singing these songs today. But maybe if you're not a Christian or you don't normally go to church or you don't think about these things, what a really bizarre thing to do, be singing about someone who died 2,000 years ago on a cross. So out of our comfort zone, it's unbelievable. And yet, that's because everything revolves around that in terms of the gospel. It revolves around Jesus giving Himself on the cross in our place.

As His answer, it's His only answer. As God, the Son, is the only answer as He gives it to our sin and our separation from Him. He bears the cost of our sin and our rebellion against God, which is death. He takes the guilt on Himself. He pays the price. He satisfies divine justice. He's the substitute. He does it because He loves us. He does it because there isn't another way. If there was another way, we would have found it. Absolutely. In fact, just before He goes to the cross, Jesus pleads with the Father and He says, if there is another way, can we do it? But He says, not my will, but yours be done, because He knows that this is the only way to satisfy divine justice and also divine love. So these are some claims, aren't they? I didn't make them up. I don't know why any of His followers would have made them up. They didn't bring power or wealth or status or influence on any of the founders of the church. Mainly, martyrdom was what they got for believing that. And I think generally, not as the Christian faith understood by most people as offering anything except a life of humility, often rejection, self-denial, accusations of bigotry and ridicule. There has to be something else that would make us follow Jesus, surely, if it's none of these things. And if it's not power, and if it's not wealth, and if it's not popularity necessarily, what is it? Well, let's just finish with revisiting the bigotry question. Where does it leave us with the bigotry question? Because that's what sort of foundation of many people's rejection of the gospel, isn't it? Aren't Christians and Jesus Christ maybe not so much Christ but certainly Christians? Aren't those who don't accept homosexuals or reject the LGBT community and say no to anything that's fun and criticise women's rights and resist abortion and are horribly moralistic and judgmental?

That would be the prevailing view of many people, wouldn't it? Christianity, and maybe sometimes we feed into that with our arrogance or our wrong understanding and thinking. But is Christ and our followers bigoted, prejudiced, racist? Well, if we're serious about our understanding of Christ and the gospel, we need to recognise that all humanity is equal. All humanity is equal. All of us are made in the image of God. That is fundamental Bible teaching that gives value to every single life and respect to every single person and that we are all spiritually in the same condition without Jesus Christ. No place for pride, no place for judgment, no place for lording over anyone else. All Christians are called to a life of love. And maybe I'm speaking now to the Christians here, more particularly. We've come to recognise we need saved, we need redemption because we are not pure in heart and we've broken God's laws, all of them, even thoughtward indeed. And these laws are laws of love, love

God and love your neighbour. And in fact, as believers, we've come to receive His love in our hearts so that we can love Him, we can love one another, but even more so, we can love our enemies. That's the radical teaching of the New Testament and that's the most radical teaching in the universe that we are called to love whoever we meet with, whoever we know, however different they are from us, whether they believe or disbelieve, even whether they are violently opposed to what we believe and what we teach. We are to love them in word and in deed. But as we do so, as we love Jesus first and love other people next, fundamental differences and disagreements will be exposed and that's for sure. And there will be times when we need to ask for forgiveness, for being hypocrites or for hating people in the name of Christ, no place for that whatsoever in his life or teaching or in us as followers.

So there may be times when we just have to say sorry for our attitude or say sorry for the attitude of people in the past. But as Christians, we also believe in society, we believe in respect and the protection of rights and freedoms and diversity and compromise.

[25 : 51] We don't believe biblically for oppression or enforced censorship or intolerance or prejudice. Interestingly, not easy to say today, but interestingly, I think there's more evidence of bigotry and of intolerance in our secular society than there was previously.

Evelyn Beatrice Hall, who I know nothing about, I don't know who she was other than she was speaking about the right of free speech back at the beginning of the twentieth century, she says, I disapprove of what you say but I defend to the death you're right to say it. And we believe in that and we should believe in that as Christians. It may be that we can have voiced as approval, but we believe absolutely in the freedom and the right of people to say. There's no place for hatred, self-righteousness, moral superiority, bigotry, homophobia or transphobia or any other phobias that are on the go. It doesn't mean that we agree with people and that we think the same way. It must be that we encourage debate and dialogue and recognition of differences both morally and philosophically, but in the context of respect and love. Hugely significant in the society in which we live. For the Christian, though, Christ is Lord. We have come to see Him and our need for Him and our relationship we have with Him. We believe His love has captivated our hearts and changed our perspective and our understanding of what true freedom is and of what truth is and what life is. That is what we have, because He is, we have, by faith we've come to believe in His forgiveness and in the transforming power of His love in our hearts.

So I finish with this. What I regard as the, by a long stretch, the most powerful apologetic for the gospel. And I think in the society in which we live, it needs to be one that we express far more so as Christians and understand. In other words, I'm not sure how easily people are persuaded by argument. I think argument is important and I'll make an argument. It's very important and it must be part of what we do when we share our faith. But we also need to recognize fundamentally that it's a spiritual problem that we have all had and we all have, and that it's only love that changes that spiritual problem. The only perspective that will change a sinner's heart is the love of Christ. It needs that strength. It needs to be something as powerful as that. It's the only thing that will capture your heart if you're not a Christian. Argument will have its place. Truth, as it's laid out before you, will have its absolute significant place. But the reality is it's not a question of evidence. It's not a question of philosophical and moral argument. Ultimately, it's a spiritual problem that we have a rebellion against God. And the only thing that can change that is when we understand and see the price He paid to deal with that rebellion. So it will capture your heart if you're not a Christian. You're made in His image. He loves you. He wants you to come home. It's that picture of the prodigal. Home to Himself and to that relationship with you that is the most fundamental reality of every one of our lives. And I can only point you to the author of that love. It's the beauty of that love. It's quite hard sometimes for a bloke to speak about that. But it's the beauty of His love which captivates us, which changes us, which holds us, which becomes our identity. That's the gospel that I have come to see, the courage, strength, compassion, tenderness, extravagance, and forgiveness, and healing, and cost, and commitment of God's love for me in Christ that's made me able to see things differently in the world in which I live. And that's the same for every believer. If we come home, we belong. He is Lord. And therefore, that is what will change our thinking about our rights, about our life, our priorities, our image, our sexuality, our pleasures, our ambitions. They will all look different when we realize that love has come to town and love changes everything for us. So I hope you'll consider that if you're not a Christian today. And we have tea and coffee afterwards. And I'll be very happy to speak to anyone or you speak to anyone around you who you think is part of the church

here. We'll be very happy to do so. So I'm going to pray and then we're going to sing. Father, we thank you for the gospel. We know it's for many people it's that horrible reality of honesty, which makes it bad news, but not bad news, full stop. Rather, a diagnosis which is humbling and exposing, but absolutely honest and real and points us towards the great love of Christ who took on all that guilt on himself on the cross to pay the price.

[31 : 56] And his resurrection to life is the guarantee of our resurrection with him. Forgive me, Lord, for not telling all the story, not enough time in the short while we're together, but pray that it would have maybe triggered an interest or further thoughts in people's minds today if they are maybe questioning or skeptical of truth. And we ask that you would be working in their hearts and touching them with your love and with the great purpose, therefore, of life that we find in you. Amen.