

What about a “Christian” Who Doesn’t Live Like One?

Everyone knows somebody who calls himself or herself a Christian, but doesn’t act like one. Christians struggle with how to think about these folks. What would you conclude about these following examples and how would you help these people?

Examples of the problem

Example 1 - Lisa’s husband shows no evidence of being a Christian. Mark told her that when he was young he went forward in a church and was baptized. He even thought he was called to preach once. When Mark got older, he taught a Sunday school class, but now he has absolutely no interest in church or spiritual things. Lisa is really irritated that Mark still considers himself a Christian when he has no interest in spiritual things. She does not know whether he is saved or not.

Example 2 - Jessica, Rob and Donna’s sixteen-year-old daughter, was having some discipline problems at home and school. They knew that part of Jessica’s problem was a set of bad friends who drank and used drugs. Rob and Donna convinced her to go to a church retreat where Jessica raised her hand in response to a gospel invitation and talked with the pastor that evening. Rob and Donna were so happy, because it seemed their prayers had been answered. Jessica even got involved with the youth group and went on a summer mission trip to Mexico. All this lasted less than a year. Jessica began to see her old friends again and later had to enter rehab for heroin addiction. Rob and Donna were so sure she had been saved, but now are only confused.

Example 3 - Jim tells his supposedly Christian neighbors, Craig and Karla, that he is not a Christian. They brought him to church once and told him afterward that he needed to become a Christian by believing in Jesus Christ. But after looking at their lives he has concluded he has nothing to gain—in this world, anyway. He watches Craig and Karla take their kids to church a couple times a month, but rarely do they stay with them. He knows that Craig cheated on Karla last year and that she cheats on her boss by padding her expense account. Craig seems to love football and beer more than his wife and children, and the shouting matches at home all but prove it. The only difference Jim sees between his life and their lives is that he has more time than they do to go fishing on Sundays.

Options for answers

No Option - They lost their salvation. Although some Christians might believe these examples show true Christians who lost their salvation, we would reject that because of the clear teaching that eternal salvation is *eternal* and *secure* (John 10:28-30; Rom. 8:29-39). For those who profess to be born-again Christians but fall short of the expected Christian lifestyle, other options explain their behavior more biblically from a grace perspective.

Option 1 - They were never truly saved. Perhaps they never really understood the facts of the gospel message about the work of Christ on the cross on their behalf. Or perhaps they did not understand the response of faith required of them. They may have made some kind of “decision” or prayed a prayer, but it was either based on false information, peer pressure, or an

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emotional impulse instead of biblical grounds. It is helpful to ask such people a “diagnostic” question such as, “If you should die, and God asked you ‘Why should I let you into My heaven?’ what would you say to Him?” Their answer will reveal what they are depending upon to get into heaven, or to have eternal life.

Option 2 - They are really Christians who have yet to mature in their Christian walk. One would expect new Christians to experience a period of growth out of old habits and worldly tendencies and into a new lifestyle. The length of this growth period may vary, but it is expected that a discernible level of Christian maturity should develop. To such people we must provide biblical teaching and biblical motivations of grace, rewards, and usefulness in God’s purpose.

Option 3 - They are really Christians who are struggling with sin. Some Christians because of their past habits, addictions, or their personality struggle with the enticements of specific sins and sometimes fail. They may have been Christians for a long time and even seen some growth and change in other areas of their lives. However, there is a besetting sin that enslaved them before salvation, perhaps from youth. They find it difficult to break the powerful hold it has on an area of life. This could be true of those who were addicted to alcohol, drugs, or sex for example. These believers need help in understanding the power of God’s Word and Spirit to help them deny the old desires of the flesh and live according to the new desires of the Spirit. They need the Spirit’s help to develop new habits to replace the old.

Option 4 - They are “backslidden” Christians. These are true believers who have chosen to live in a worldly way. Some might deny this possibility if the person remains in sin very long. Still, most admit that Christians can make sinful choices and live self-centered lives. Such believers need to be told to repent of their sin, appreciate the grace given them at salvation, and live so as to honor that grace. They need to be reminded that there are both temporal (God’s discipline) and eternal consequences (loss of rewards) for those who stray.

Conclusion. In the end, only God, and perhaps the person in question, knows for sure whether those who call themselves Christians but don’t act like it are truly saved. All we can really do is make sure they understand the gospel and the grace of God it represents, and exhort or instruct them in righteousness. If they are true believers, they will have to give an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ for how they lived their lives (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10).