What is Christianity?

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Preacher: Ross Anderson

[0:00] Lord Jesus, many of us here believe that you are present among us, unseen but real, because you've promised to be wherever even a few of your disciples meet in your name.

And as we thank you for your presence among us this morning, we ask that you will open our eyes to see your glory, that you'll open our ears to hear your word, and that you'll open our hearts to receive your grace. Amen.
Well, I want to bring you this morning one of the clearest and concisest statements that has ever been made on the essence of Christianity.
It comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, which Dylan read for us. So please have a look again. Keep your Bible open, if you will, or open up your phone.
Turn again to Philippians chapter 3, and our section we're going to look at is verses 4 to 11. Now, it's immediately evident from these verses, and as Dylan was reading, I hope you picked it up.
[1:13] It's immediately evident from these verses what the essence of Christianity is and what it isn't. And I'll begin negatively.

First of all, Christianity is not merely a creed. It's not merely a summary of orthodox beliefs. Of course, Christianity has a creed. It's very important what we believe and why we believe what we believe.
But it's perfectly possible to believe the creed. It's perfectly possible to say the creed from beginning to end and still not be a Christian at all.
As James puts it in his letter in the New Testament, even the demons believe and shudder. The demons will happily recite the creed, says James.
That's quite a shock, isn't it? So, you see, just because you believe the creed, just because you believe Christian orthodoxy, does not make any of us a Christian.
[2:19] Then, secondly, Christianity is not merely a code of conduct. Once again, please don't misunderstand me. Christian conduct is very, very important. It's part of being a Christian, as we're going to see a little bit later on this morning.

There is such a thing as Christian ethics. The teaching of Jesus and the Mount, which we commonly refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, is widely regarded as the most wonderful ethical teaching that has ever been given.
But you can be upright and well-behaved and decent in your standards of living, but not be a Christian at all. There are many secular humanists.
There are many adherents of other faiths who are very upright, but they are not Christians. So, that is not Christianity.
Simply doing good works does not make anyone a Christian. There is only one good work that makes a sinner righteous before God, and that is the finished work of Jesus on the cross.
[3:28] He did the good work for us. We cannot add to that. And then, thirdly, Christianity, in essence, is not merely a matter of ceremonies. So, it's not simply a matter of creed, of orthodoxy.

Christianity is not merely a creed. It's not simply a matter of conduct, a code of conduct. You can be very upright and a very good neighbor in the neighborhood.
That doesn't necessarily make you a Christian. And thirdly, Christianity, in essence, is not merely a matter of ceremonies. Now, of course, Christianity has ceremonies.
Baptism, Holy Communion. We celebrated Holy Communion this morning. And what an amazing thing to be invited to sit with Jesus at a meal and to share a meal with him and with one another.
So, Christianity has ceremonies. There is baptism. There is Holy Communion. And they are very, very important. But these things do not make anyone a Christian. Maybe you are baptized in a Christian church in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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[4:39] Maybe you partake of Holy Communion on a regular basis. But that makes no one a Christian. It's perfectly possible to be religious without being Christian.

To go through the gamut of outward religious observance. Read the Bible. Say your prayers. Go to church. Get baptized. Be confirmed. It's possible to do all that and not be a Christian.
And let me briefly add, as I conclude, these negatives, that not only is the essence of Christianity not any of those three things.
It isn't all three put together either. It's quite possible to be orthodox in our beliefs, upright in our conduct, correct in our ceremonial observances, and still have missed the boat completely.
Missed the essence of Christianity. Let me try and illustrate it for you. Years ago, when my son Bruce, Lindy and I, our son Bruce, was a little boy, he loved cricket.
[5:48] He was mad on cricket. In fact, he loved all sports, and he still does. And we had a member at St. James called Craig Matthews.

He was a protea cricketer. He played cricket for South Africa. You may remember the name.
Anyway, he very kindly gave Bruce one of his South African cricket shirts.
So we would sometimes be playing. Bruce was, I don't know, Bruce was very young. He was about six or seven years old. We'd be playing cricket on the lawn at home. And then, you know, as young boys do, he would pretend to be this bowler or that batsman or whatever.
And then he would suddenly say, oh, no, I'm Craig Matthews. And he'd run inside, get Craig Matthews' shirt, and put it on, and come out again and say, now I'm going to bowl you out. Now, you can wear Craig Matthews' springbok or protea cricket shirt, but that doesn't make you Craig Matthews.
You can believe in the Christian creed. You can be a goody-goody conduct.
[6:58] You can partake of the ceremonies. It doesn't make you a Christian. Creed conduct ceremonies do not make anyone a Christian.

Well, then, what is Christianity? What on earth is missing? How is it that you can be upright and orthodox and religious and still not be a Christian? I mean, Ross, are you? Ross, I come to this church almost every Sunday.
How can you tell me that that doesn't make me a Christian? Well, what does make me a Christian then? What is the essence of Christianity? Thank you for asking.
Just be patient. I'll tell you now. I can give it to you in one word. What is the essence of Christianity? One word. Christ.
Christianity is Christ. Christianity is a person, not a system. It is not primarily a system or a philosophy or a theology or ceremony or ethics.
[8:00] It isn't a system at all. It has a creed. It has an ethic. And as we've seen, those things are important. But it's a person. And Christianity is a personal relationship with a person.

Without this personal relationship to Christ, everything else is really meaningless. It is only after we know Christ that the theology and ethics and ceremony and religion find their rightful place.
You see, it's right for Craig Matthews to wear the South African cricket shirt. Because first and foremost, he was selected and he played for South Africa.
Had he never been selected, were he not a cricketer, but wore that shirt, it's actually meaningless.
You see, we can have all the trappings of Christianity.
Maybe you've grown up in the church. You know all the right language to speak. You know what justification means. You know what righteousness means. You know the hymns by heart.
[9:08] You've got a Bible. That doesn't make you a Christian. Where does Christ fit into your life? Well, it's high time that we explored this positive now.

Let's move away from the negative, what Christianity isn't. And let's now look at the positive, what Christianity is. We come back to our text in order to find out the positive.
Jesus Christ is mentioned in that short reading in Philippians 3. The Lord Jesus is mentioned no less than 10 times. Christ was at the very center of Paul's life and faith.
And if the Lord Jesus is not at the center of our life and faith, well then, we are not truly Christian.
Listen again. Look at Philippians chapter 3.
I'll just read from verse 7. I won't read the whole thing again. Philippians chapter 3, verse 7. You heard that reading from Dylan.
[10:08] He was a Jew of the Jews, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, of the tribe of Benjamin. I mean, in terms of religion, there was no one better qualified than the apostle Paul.

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Paul says, All of that I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.
Knowing Jesus. Note the personal relationship. My Lord. For whose sake I've lost all things. I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ.
Gain Christ and be found in Him. Note the personal relationship again. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.
The righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. Paul says, I want to know Christ. Ten times in that short passage, the Lord Jesus is mentioned.
[11:14] And Paul's overwhelming desire, his longing, his heartfelt longing, is to know Jesus Christ. So what we need to ask is, Where is Christ in our lives?

With all the gentleness and love in the world, may I please ask you, Where is Christ in your life today?
Is He at the center? Or is He on the periphery? Somewhere out there in the circumference.
In Zulu. My Zulu friends ask. Does He sit outside?
Or is He inside? Is Jesus the center of your life? Or is St. Mark's Plumstead Christianity just putting on Craig Matthews' shirt?
[12:23] It's external. Nothing's changed in your heart. Deep down in your psyche, nothing's happened. Your sins are not forgiven. You are not right with God. Do we know Christ?

Do you know Him? Personally and intimately? So firstly, the essence of Christianity is to know Christ as our friend. Secondly, it's to know Christ as our Savior.
And thirdly, it's to know Christ as our Lord. We're going to look at those three quickly. I mean, think about it. The Lord Jesus is the second person of the Trinity.
God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. We can have a personal relationship with God.
Listen, if that doesn't excite you, you are dead.
You are past dead. I don't know what you are. So number one, firstly, the essence of Christianity is to know Christ as our friend. Wow.
[13:22] God wants to be my friend. That can't possibly be right. You know, there are many people who don't even want to be my friend. Sometimes there are even family members who don't want to be my friend.

Now are you telling me that God wants to be my friend? That's mind-blowing. That word friend may well strike some of us as being altogether too intimate, altogether too familiar, even inappropriate. How can you call God your friend? And so it would be if Jesus himself had not used it. But he spoke to his apostles in the upper room and said, I'm quoting the Lord Jesus now, I do not call you servants.
I have called you my friends. God is your friend. What a friend we have in Jesus.
So it is he himself who desires to have that relationship of intimacy with us that we call friendship.
Listen, dear friends, the truth is none of us search for God. God loves us.
[14:37] He made us in his image. He died for us. He wants to be our friend. It's absolutely mind-blowing. Paul speaks here of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, not just knowing about him.

Many people know about him. Many are well acquainted with all the facts of his life, his death, his burial, his resurrection, some of his teaching. You know, just about everybody in South Africa knows about Jesus.
But that doesn't make you a Christian. Do you know him, not about him? I know a lot about our first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela.
I know a lot about him. I know that he was born on the 18th of July 1918. I know he was unjustly imprisoned for nearly 28 years.
I know he walked free on the 11th of February 1990. I know he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. I know he was the African president from 1994 to 1999.
[15:47] I know he died on December the 5th, 2013, in Johannesburg. I know all about him. There's nothing you can tell me about Nelson Mandela. I've read three books on Nelson, his autobiography, and another two biographies on his life.

I know more than enough about him. But I never knew him. I never met him personally. I never had a relationship with him. I never spent time with him.

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I never knew him as a personal friend. I never even had a cup of coffee with him. I know all about him. But I never knew him. You may know all about Jesus.
But you've never actually met him. Christianity is to know Jesus as a personal friend.
Secondly, the essence of Christianity is not only to know Jesus as a friend, but it's to trust Jesus as Savior. He is not only the object of our knowledge, but also the object of our faith, our belief, our trust.
[17:00] Let me read to you again what Paul writes in our passage. Philippians 3, end of verse 8 and beginning of verse 9. He speaks of his desire, end of verse 8.

He speaks of his desire to gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.
Now, I want to try and unpack that verse for you, because it sounds maybe a little bit complicated, but actually it isn't at all. So let me put it like this. All of us believe that God is righteous.
We sang about it earlier, and Dylan used it in the prayers. God is holy. God is righteous. That means he doesn't tolerate sin. He is separate from sin.
Injustice, evil, oppression, lying, cheating, corruption. God is the exact opposite of all that stuff. He is absolutely holy.
[18:09] He is perfect, without sin, without fault. Now, all of us believe that God is righteous. That is, if we believe in God at all. If we believe in God, we must believe that he is righteous.

Psalm 11, for the Lord is righteous. He loves justice. Psalm 116, the Lord is gracious and righteous. Psalm 119, righteous are you, O Lord, and upright are all your judgments.
Psalm 144, 145, sorry. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. Israel 9, Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous.
There's hundreds of other verses I could give you to make the point. God is righteous. If he weren't righteous, he wouldn't be God. It stands to reason, therefore, that if we are ever to enter God's presence, either in this life or the next, we too have to be righteous.
Because what fellowship can light have with darkness? And that is our big problem. I am not righteous.
[19:25] Forgive me for being blunt. You know, before I went to study theology, I was a diesel mechanic. I qualified as a diesel mechanic. Now, we tradesmen can be quite a rough bunch.

So we call a spade a spade. We're not worried about all your airs and graces and so on. So I'm going to put it straight. We are not righteous.
You, dear friend, are not righteous. You are not perfect. You may think you are. I can tell you you're not. God is perfect. How can that which is riddled with sin have fellowship with he who is perfect? How? That is our problem. That is humanity's big problem. How do we get a righteousness that will be acceptable to God?
Only two answers have ever been given in the history of humanity to that question. Only two answers have ever been given. How can we get righteous with God?
[20:34] Only two answers have ever been given. The first is that I will go about to establish my own righteousness. By my own good works, by my benevolence and philanthropy and religious observances, I will seek to weave around myself a clothing of righteousness that will be acceptable to God.

And therefore, I can stand in his presence. Many, many, many people try and do that. But I have to tell you, that attempt is doomed to failure. Because we can never make ourselves righteous enough to enter the presence of God.
The Bible says that our righteousness are like filthy rags in the sight of a holy God. If we honestly think that we can enter God's right presence in the tattered rags of our own morality, well, we either have a very exaggerated view of ourselves or a very inadequate view of God.
Or probably both. There's no possibility of entering the presence of God in our righteousness. Because it's just not acceptable to God.
We have to humble ourselves and admit that fact. We are not righteous. We cannot make ourselves righteous. So what hope is there?
[22:04] Ah, there's great hope. We now come to the second answer that is given to that question. How can we get a righteousness that will allow us to enter the presence of God and be in fellowship with God?

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Paul says that the only alternative is to receive a righteousness from God. You cannot make your own righteousness because you will never be good enough.
None of us. Because we are sinners by nature. But here's the second answer. God will clothe you in the righteousness of Jesus as a free gift.
And with that gift, we are acceptable to God. Because Jesus Christ came into the world and lived himself a perfect life of righteousness and love.
He had no sin of his own which he had to pay for. No sin of his own that he had to atone for. No sin of his own that he had to die for. But he still went to the cross and died for your sin and for my sin.
[23:13] He made our sin his own. He made our guilt his own. He made our condemnation his own.

In our place he stood condemned, bearing our sin and guilt in his own innocent person. On the cross, the moment he took our sin upon himself, God the Father now withdrew from his Son. Because God cannot have fellowship with sin. And so Jesus takes our sin upon himself. And he understands that he's separated from his Father. And he cries out on the cross in anguish, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
We know the answer. God the Father forsook God the Son because of our sin.
That we might come into fellowship with the Father. And in the darkness of the God forsakenness of the cross, He tasted the awful horrors of hell.
[24:23] Jesus did that for us. So if we come to Christ and put our trust in Christ as the Savior who died for us, An amazing exchange takes place.

He takes away our sin and he places on us instead his righteousness. That's the glory of the gospel. It's a wonderful exchange.
Last year, this time, Ashley and I were in the UK. And we had a terrific time. We hired a car and we were driving. I don't know what's wrong with those people in the UK.
Forgive me if you're from the UK. But I don't know what's wrong with them because once you get out to the country, The roads are this narrow. And they're like six feet deep.
They've been there for 6,000 years. So they're six feet deep into the ground. Now you're driving along and then a tractor, a huge John Deere or International Harvester tractor, Not a four-wheeler, an eight-wheeler, comes the other direction.
[25:25] Now you've got to reverse for about two kilometers until you get one of those little lay-bys. And then the tractor comes past. He won't reverse. And he's bigger than you so you can't argue with him.

So you just have to reverse. Anyway, Ash and I were in the UK. We had a wonderful time. We went to a couple of, you know, our friends, St. Helens Church in Bishop's Gate, All Souls Church in Langham Place, et cetera, et cetera.
It was really a good time. But there was one thing that wasn't so good about the UK. In fact, it was, excuse my French, damn awful. And that is to buy one pound.
We had to spend, I don't know what, 23 rand. That was a bad exchange. You don't want to make that exchange. Trust me. I will never again go to the UK in my whole life.
They are a bunch of thieves. What kind of exchange is that? To buy one miserable pound, you can only buy a cup of coffee with it. You can't even buy a cup of coffee for a pound.
[26:27] I've got to pay 23 rand. Think about this exchange. The Lord Jesus takes our filthy rags, our sin, puts it on himself, and gives us instead his perfect righteousness.

It's incredible. It's incredible. No wonder it's called the gospel. You know what gospel means? Good news. This is good news indeed.
You know that the difference between Christianity and every other religion in the history of humanity is two letters of the alphabet.
You're all now looking confused. Let me say it again. Actually, are you paying attention? Okay, I've just got to watch this, man. The difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world is two letters of the alphabet.
Religion says do. Do this. Do that. Do the next thing. Do, do, do, do. Laws, laws, laws, regulations, and then you might become acceptable to God.
[27:40] Christianity adds two letters of the alphabet to do. N-E. It's done. Jesus has done it for us.

He's opened the way. He has made a righteousness available to us. Now we come to the third and last point. We have seen so far that the essence of Christianity is to know Christ as a friend.

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That's mind-blowing. To know him as our savior. That's mind-blowing. And now thirdly, it is to obey Jesus as Lord. Because what Paul writes of here, look carefully.
This is Philippians chapter 3 verse 8. Paul says, Paul writes here, of the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.
You see, he's not just my friend. He's not just my savior. He is my savior. He is my savior. He is my lord.
[28:50] He is my savior. I do not hesitate to say that we cannot have Christ as savior and friend if we do not also have him as our Lord.

There's a cost involved. The lordship of Jesus Christ, the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ is one of the most neglected truths in Christianity today.
And that's partly why the Christian church has so little impact on our South African society. People think they can claim to be Christian, but then just live the way they want to live.
And go along with the status quo. And continue to worship leisure, pleasure, and treasure. No, no.
To know Christ as friend and savior is impossible if we don't know him also as Lord.
It's not enough to pay lip service to his lordship. He says to us, as he did on the Sermon on the Mount, Why do you call me Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say?
[29:55] Jesus is questioning people who outwardly profess to respect him as their lord, but who fail to live out his teachings.

It highlights the hypocrisy of simply saying, Lord, Lord, Lord, and then not living accordingly. We are called to a life of obedience, a life of service, because Jesus is Lord.
He is our king. He is our lord. He is our creator. He is our master. This is an essential ingredient of authentic Christianity.
Are we Christians? Are you a Christian? Let me try and apply it like this. Is Jesus the Lord, the master of every aspect of my life?
Is he the lord, the master of every aspect of your life? Public and private, personal and corporate, family, home, job, emotions, possessions, ambitions, politics, sport, economics, citizenship.
[31:11] Is Jesus Lord of everything? So in all these areas of life, politics, ambitions, sport, economics, possessions, citizenship, do we think, how must I live in this area of life that is honoring to Christ who is my lord?

I want to do his will. I want to live for him. I want to please him in every area of my life. That's authentic Christianity. And do you know what you discover?
The old saying that his service, living for him under his lordship, his service is actually perfect freedom.
Well, it's time for me to conclude. The essence of Christianity is neither a creed nor a code of conduct nor religious ceremonies. The essence of Christianity is Christ.
It's knowing Christ through the new birth. It's trusting Christ as savior by faith and repentance. And it's obeying Christ, living for him, living his way as lord of all my life.
[32:29] What is a Christian? A Christian is one who knows and loves Christ, who trusts in Christ and who obeys Christ. So I ask you again, are you a Christian?

Is Jesus your friend? Not the church, not religion. Is Jesus your friend? Do you know him personally?
Not about him. I know all about Mandela. I never, ever knew him. Never. I had no relationship with him whatsoever. Do you know Jesus as your friend?
Do you know him as your savior? Have you ever trusted in him? Have you ever gone to him in prayer and said, Lord Jesus, I realized for the first time that I'm not righteous.
I'm not acceptable to you. But you have a perfect righteousness to give me. I accept it. Please clothe me, Lord Jesus, in your righteousness.
[33:36] I'm going to pray together. I'm going to pray together. I'm going to pray together. I'm going to say a prayer similar to the one I prayed many, many years ago when I committed my life to the Lord Jesus and when I asked him for his righteousness.

And if you are ready to do the same, then I want to invite you now silently in the privacy of your own heart to make this your prayer.
Today, Lord Jesus Christ, I have to admit that I've gone my own way. And I realize that more than ever today.

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And I'm sorry for my sin and self-centeredness. But Lord Jesus, I thank you for dying for me, for bearing my sin and guilt in your own innocent person so that I could be forgiven.
I thank you that you rose again from the dead. And now, Lord Jesus, I ask you to forgive my sin. I accept you as friend, as savior, and as Lord.
[35:05] Oh, please come into my life. Lord Jesus, please work the miracle of the new birth in me today. And thank you for your great gifts of faith and repentance.

Please give me grace to be your friend, to love you as savior, and to serve you as Lord for the rest of my life.
Just a few more moments of silent reflection as you think about your relationship with Jesus this morning.
Now we pray, Lord Jesus, that by your Holy Spirit, you will give to any who have asked you to come into their lives today.
As the days, the weeks, and the months pass, we pray that you will grant each of us a deepening inward assurance that you have received us and that we truly are children of our heavenly Father.
[36:22] We ask it for your namesake. Amen.

Amen. Thank you.

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