

Am I Committed?

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg challenges Christians to evaluate their commitment to caring for others and speaking truthfully about sin and redemption in light of the Gospel.

Duration: 34:55

Scripture: Isaiah 1:18, Matthew 22:37-39, Luke 5:17-20, John 1:17, James 3:1

Topics: "Commitment"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the issue of confusion in our culture and compromise within the church. He emphasizes that the Bible is clear on matters of faith and challenges Christians to respond to the unique opportunity and challenge of living out their faith in this current time. The speaker uses the story of Jesus healing a paralytic to illustrate the importance of caring deeply for others and being committed enough to take action. He also highlights the need for truthful speech and living differently in a world that both condones and despises certain behaviors.

Transcript

The issue that we're dealing with is a very real one. I've picked up all manner of literature, now I've been completely inundated with stuff for which I'm thankful. Let me simply say that one of the pieces of literature that I received from a ministry in Philadelphia points out that while this ministry in Philadelphia reaches out to the homosexual community, in their most recent prayer letter from their executive director, they say that although we're managing to do all these things, we're involved in a 125-to-1 operation.

What do I mean? Just this. There are over 125 organized efforts to get people involved in the homosexual lifestyle in Philadelphia. We recently found out about two such groups in the Northeast.

One has a budget of \$4 million and another of \$13 million. The financial resources seem unlimited and come from many individuals and corporations who want to appear, quote, progressive and open-minded. We're dealing with an issue that is of epidemic proportions.

We try to set it in context this morning and say that it is not the issue, but it is a significant issue. We have laid down three statements. Number one, that our culture is confused.

Number two, that the church by and large is compromised. Number three, that the Bible is clear. And number four, in the form of a question to which we come this evening, is the Christian individual committed

enough to respond to this unique opportunity and supreme challenge at this point in our lives? Is the Christian committed? Or if you like, to take it from the third person and turn it around for us individually to ask ourselves the question tonight, Am I committed? That's the question.

Am I committed? Now, the person next to me, in front of me, behind me, across the street from me--me. Where does my commitment lie in relationship to the Scriptures and the responsibilities and privileges of following Christ? I gave you this morning the outline for my message, and I am planning to follow it. Am I, as a Christian, first of all committed to care deeply? To care deeply.

The agape love of Christ, which is not thinking first of what I'm getting but of what I'm giving, is to characterize those who follow after Jesus. But we need to be honest enough to acknowledge this evening, friends, that the sad truth is simply this--that for many, even for most homosexuals, the church is one of the last places that they would ever consider looking for either hope or for help. We may not want to acknowledge that.

We may want to isolate ourselves and say that we are different from all the rest. But let us include ourselves for a moment with the mainstream of what is happening and acknowledge this to be true. Many, many people would not look to the church.

In some cases, because the church is sadly affected by the same problem and that without any victory at all. The recurrent emphasis and discoveries of homosexuality, which pervades many sectors of the Roman Catholic priesthood, has made it such that many, many people have determined that there is no possibility whatsoever of them going there for help or for hope. Because those who stand as representatives of any help or hope which may be offered find by their own lifestyle and testimony that they are unable to offer any kind of alternative, having been sucked into the same sad and sinful experience.

We are certainly not wishing to cast aspersions on any denomination. People have written to me concerning that. Be careful, they have said, and I appreciate the word of caution, and I want to be.

I'm not trying to make blanket, categorical statements about everyone and everything, but I think that what I'm saying can be verified by those with an open mind who simply read their morning newspapers. One of my friends in a church in Indiana took a significant church there a few years ago now, and it was discovered just in the last few months that his pastor of worship, who has been there for a prolonged period of time, has developed an extensive radio and television ministry, has largely been the key to the church, admitted in the last few months that he has been involved in a homosexual lifestyle while married and with children for the last twenty years of his life. And as we were preparing for worship this evening here in our own fair city, the United Church of Christ stepped up to the plate once again and ordained this man as a homosexual minister into their congregation in Cleveland.

In this article, the man from yesterday's plane dealer proclaims, One, God called me to ministry. Two, God made me gay. Sir, wrong on both counts.

The Word of God does not lie. God does not call into ministry those who violate the clear instruction of his Word. God does not make people gay.

And yet the fact of the matter is that this towered over the complete religious page in our newspaper yet again. And the thing that galls me so much is not the fact of its existence but the way that it is continually

reported--no angle, simple blanket statement, doing what the consensus wants done--namely, to legitimize this issue to such a degree that anyone speaking in the way that I have spoken on these previous three occasions could be cast off into oblivion as some kind of non-thinking bigot. People do not largely go to the church because the church is in such dreadful disarray.

Secondly, people do not go to the church because in many, many cases it is suffering from a bad case of Phariseeism. And I concluded this way this morning. It was uppermost in my mind.

Many people will testify to the fact that they have come out of a gay lifestyle looking for help in the church only to encounter the spirit of the Pharisee in Luke 19, "I thank thee that I am not as other men are, and especially not like this poor homosexual next to me." "I thank thee," says the church when this kind of spirit pervades it, "I thank thee that I don't have anything big of which to be ashamed." And concurrently, right along with Phariseeism, people are turned away from the church as a result of what we might refer to as triumphalism. Again, I alluded to this this morning. Welcome to our church, the place for people who have it all together.

And there's all kinds of ways that we send a signal. We don't always know that we're doing it, but we're doing it many times. It sometimes has to do with the way we dress.

It sometimes has to do with the way we frame our conversations in the corridors and in the hallways. It has to do with the way we gather in our own little groups, looking out for our own little friends and missing some who are the most lonely people as they stand around on the fringe wondering if there is a friendly face anywhere for them. And people from a homosexual lifestyle will tell you that this kind of isolationism which they have experienced is often the product in their own minds of what they have discovered to be two things in the lives of Christian people--disgust and fear.

And I think if we're honest enough to pare away our immediate ability to present ourselves in our best light, those of us who have come out of a background where God has preserved us from such things know what it is to fear and to feel revulsion. So the question remains, am I as a Christian committed enough to Jesus Christ and to his Word to care deeply for people, to express compassion towards people in the way that Jesus himself did when he looked out on the crowd and he saw them as sheep without a shepherd? Surely an effective church will have homosexuals in it--that is, people who have felt able to come within the framework of the church because it will also have within its walls others who have long-standing patterns of life-dominating sin. Any church that is worth its salt must be reaching out to people whose lives are marked by long-standing patterns of life-dominating sin.

But those whose lives have been marked by these long-standing patterns often will tell us that they felt no sense that that church or that Christian had begun to wrestle with the implications of what it would mean to turn a cold shoulder, a blind eye, a disinterested gaze in their direction. It is our responsibility to convey to people what Jesus conveyed to people. He conveyed grace to people.

The law came by Moses, says John in John 1, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. He conveyed forgiveness to people. He conveyed hope to people.

And he conveyed change to people. When we love deeply, when we care deeply, then from our lives and from our eyes and from our hearts, from our tongues, will flow a message of grace, forgiveness, change, and hope. Turn for a moment to Luke chapter 5 and verse 17.

One day as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem were sitting there, and the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. So, first of all, here's a group of guys that cared about their friend.

He was sick, couldn't move, couldn't get himself where he needed to go, so they picked him up and carried him on a mat. They cared enough to take him to where Jesus was. He was in the house.

They cared enough, says Luke, to try and get him in the house. They found out that they couldn't get in because of the crowd, and they cared enough to go up on the roof. They cared enough, presumably, to crack open the roof, recognizing that whoever owned the house was going to be really ticked off with the fact that his roof was falling in.

And they cared enough to, presumably, put the money aside to be able to repair the roof, because they wouldn't want to leave the roof in that condition, and they lured the man down into the middle of the crowd right in front of Jesus. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said, Friend, your sins are gone. They cared deeply.

Caring deeply means love in action. Caring deeply is not talk. Caring deeply is action.

Caring deeply is saying, I care, I love, I have grace, I have forgiveness, I have hope, I have change. I want to hold your hand. I want to bring you to Jesus.

If there's a crowd, I'm gonna pull a hole in the roof, and I'm gonna let you right down inside. Am I committed enough to care deeply? Secondly, am I committed enough to speak honestly? Truthful speech in our interpersonal relationships. Not subscribing to the world's hopelessness.

Not allowing opportunities to pass us by in conversation where people sign off the ends of conversations with phrases like, Well, a leopard can never change its spots. Or, Well, I guess if you're born with it, that's it. Or, No one can ever be changed from this.

You can't let that pass, loved ones. Don't. Drop into the conversation and say, Yes, they can.

And yes, they are. And when people ask how it would be, then we will tell them about Jesus. But it demands that we speak honestly.

That our homosexual friends, as we meet with them and talk with them and share coffee with them, and as they badly want us somehow to authenticate their existence, will tell us that deep within their souls, they're longing that somebody would challenge their very existence and at the same time not simply challenge their lifestyle but offer them the chance of change. And the only way that we will ever be that person is when we are prepared not simply to care deeply but at the same time to speak honestly. We've got to be prepared to insist that sinful patterns of behavior must be changed, and sinful patterns of behavior can be changed.

And to take hold of 2 Corinthians 5.17 and write it in our hearts and stamp it on our minds and proclaim it from our lips, if any man or woman be in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. Jesus makes people brand new.

Jesus keeps no record of sins. Jesus transforms to the uttermost all who call unto God through him. He is able to make our sins whiter than snow, though they be red like crimson, though they be fouled up and dirt.

Now, if that kind of communication is going to be there in a congregation's interpersonal relationships, we need to recognize that there is little question but that the tone of preaching in a church largely sets the tone for the way in which Christians will communicate. That lays a heavy responsibility on all who have the responsibility of teaching--probably one of the reasons that James says that we shouldn't really be wanting badly to become teachers, because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. There is no place that Bible would give to us to turn this little pulpit area here into some kind of coward's castle, whereby we could stand up and say things and mouth off and scream away, and then, once we come down, as it were, onto the floor and in interpersonal relationships, step back from everything that we've proclaimed with such vehemence.

Therefore, it is imperative that we pray for those who teach in this church, because this is our church--especially if our propensity is to have our words full of salt and seasoned with grace, because they're supposed to be full of grace and seasoned with salt. Some of us were put together in such a way that we would bend over backwards to be nice, and therefore we need to be egged on to be forthright. Some of us were put together in such a way that we need to be straightened up from being bad, and therefore we need to be stimulated mostly towards grace.

And it is the burden of my heart, especially as I address issues like this, that the message that I have been proclaiming, want to proclaim, would be a message of grace, would be a message of radical hope, would be shot through with expectation that people, even in these three occasions, would come to a realization of the fact that Jesus Christ will change their lives. The mailbag as a result of last Sunday morning's sermon was as large as any I've had in a long, long time. And I want to read to you from a couple of letters which were, frankly, a tremendous encouragement to me.

And I have not selected these letters from a bunch that were critical letters. I need to say to you that while I may have had the odd word of caution, that without exception, everything that has been written to me has been written as a word of encouragement. This comes from someone who is anonymous, who says at the end of the letter they would be happy for any of this to be shared if I ever felt that it was helpful.

In the midst of all that was said, I am sure you will receive many comments on your sermon yesterday, 131. I would like to add mine as a way of encouragement. I have recently come out of a gay relationship, and I've been struggling to gain back my relationship with God and my sense of closeness to him.

A few paragraphs down, I was very impressed with your comments on the church and people in the church. I think that most gay people know that the Bible has only negative things to say about a homosexual lifestyle. They don't need to have Christians angrily call them all sorts of names and make stereotypic comments.

Most gay people just blend in with the scenery and carry on their lives in quiet desperation. They are mostly looking for love and have found an imitation. The things that gave me courage to try again were the quiet witness of couples whose marriages were happy, meaningful, and supportive.

They also looked like they were having fun. How many married couples actually have relationships that are attractive to outsiders? Not many. But I had the privilege of being around a few during this time.

Another thing that encouraged me was seeing strong leadership by Christian men--leadership that inspired others, encouraged women, and would not compromise God's principles. This is a rarity. One of the main things that has encouraged me before and since my decision has been your faithful preaching of the Word.

Since I've been coming to Parkside, this is the first sermon I've ever heard on homosexuality. However, you have preached about trusting God, obedience, faithfulness, and all other sorts of topics which God has used to encourage me and build back in my soul a sense that he has not abandoned me. The individual then goes on to speak about two sermons in particular that were helpful, and then concludes, I write these things just to let you know that by the church functioning as the church, and the Word preached as it should be, that the heart of one person and, I suspect, others has been changed.

By becoming involved in politics, the Christian community has lost its credibility and power. The power lies in God working in individual lives. I could ramble on, but I know you're busy, and I appreciate your time.

If you think this letter would be helpful to others, then please share it with me. Anonymous for now, maybe later I'll have enough courage to sign my name. This evening, when I got up to my office, I found another slipped underneath the door.

I've been coming to your church for over ten years. By looking at me, you would probably never guess that I've been an active homosexual for years. In fact, few people in the church would imagine that I had once been in such great darkness.

You see, I had learned the art of disguising my true self--an art I learned when I was very young. As a child, I'd been an easy target of bullies who'd labeled me as a sissy for my slight build and mildly effective mannerisms. Soon I felt isolated in my relationships with males.

The further away I was pushed, the more intense my longing for male approval became. I learned that there were older men who would provide this approval and much more. I learned--double underline--that homosexual behavior could be a temporarily satisfying way to get the attention I so desperately wanted from men.

Unfortunately, only unhealthy men seemed available to fulfill this need. This letter isn't about me or my past sin, however. It's about Christ.

Only in the Scriptures and in the teaching I heard every Sunday did I find the hope to break the habitual pattern of promiscuous behavior. The message of freedom in 1 Corinthians 6 was life-changing. I had an increasing hunger not for heterosexuality but for holiness.

Your messages from the pulpit encouraged me to be accountable to God for my actions and to make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. I saw my desires change. I was able to apologize to others whom I had wronged, and I was able to decrease the type of homosexual behavior and the incidences of homosexual acting out.

I am now completely celibate, but not unhappily so. Making others my focus has left me little time for self-pity. I've found that losing myself is the true path to joy and fulfillment.

I was completely self-centered in the gay life. I also found that there was no truth in some homosexuals' warnings that I would encounter harsh rejection in the church. I found only warmth and sincerity from the

people who befriended me.

I was so comfortable in the genuine love of a few of these dear friends that I knew I could enlist their aid in my struggle to leave homosexuality behind. These dear friends prayed for me and with me, sent me homemade packets of Scripture memory verses, welcomed me into their homes and lives. If I have ever been on the receiving end of rejection because of my past, then I never consciously knew it.

I have nothing but gratitude for my new family in Christ. I was drowning in fear and self-loathing when I carried my secret alone. How thankful I was, and I still am, for the fact that I found a solid rock of hope and holiness in the teaching of the Bible at Parkside.

If it weren't for the firm but loving exhortation I receive each week, I would have given myself totally over to homosexual behavior. I was on a reckless path of self-destruction when I entered this church. How sincerely I praise God for the love you and the church have shown me.

You have loved me enough to say, quotes, this is the path that leads to destruction, but this is the one that leads to life. Take the narrower road. Christ in you has made this journey possible.

With warmest thanks and in genuine Christian love, a friend. P.S., if anything in this letter can encourage another, then please feel free to share it. The fact of the matter is, you see, that in this article on the ordaining of this gentleman, the point that he makes is that the church, he says, is supposed to reach out to all these different people and to be nonjudgmental of gays and others who are different--to be accepting and nonjudgmental of gays and others who are different.

Listen, this Bible is judgmental on all of us, gay or un-gay. This Bible says that we're dead in our trespasses and in our sins--heterosexual sin, homosexual sin, any kind of sin. You cannot have this stuff, not if you proclaim the Bible.

The Bible says there is a broad road that leads to destruction, there is a narrow road that leads to life. This is a testimony to futility. This holds no hope.

This is emptiness. This is despair. This is life.

This is grace. This is change. This is it.

Are you committed enough to care deeply? Are you committed enough to speak boldly? Are you committed enough, finally, to live differently? To live differently. To live different lives before the watching world--a world that, on the one hand, condones homosexuality and, on the other hand, despises it with a vitriolic hatred. And so we face the challenge of falling into either pit--on the one hand, the knee-jerk reaction which has marked large chunks of fundamentalism, or the condoning stupidity that has marked large chunks of liberalism.

Neither is an option, if you want to be a biblical Christian. We're gonna have to be prepared to live differently--bold in relationship to sin, gentle in relationship to sinners. To live differently not only when I'm out there in the coffee room tomorrow morning, but to live differently when I come in here amongst the worshiping community of God's people.

I want to ask you to be very prayerful about coming in this building. I don't really feel that we've got a hold of this place yet. It still feels strange to me.

I don't know how it feels to you. It's still too much new. It's too much, how does it sound? It's too much, how does it fit? It's just too much.

And I'm keen to be beyond it. And I don't think the singing has been that good since we came in here. That's a personal opinion.

I think some people are looking around. I think some people are checking it out. I don't know who's doing what.

But I want to tell you to turn your Bible to 1 Corinthians 14 for just a minute. We'll come to this in 1 Corinthians one day in the future. But for now, Paul is talking about what will happen when an unbeliever comes into the family of God.

If he comes in and finds everybody speaking in tongues, he says, he's probably gonna say they're out of their minds. If he comes in and finds everybody is prophesying and speaking out the Word of God--verse 24--he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner. This is what Paul expects to happen when the unbeliever comes into the church.

Not he comes into the church, and ultimately, at the core level of his being, he says, Oh my, what a wonderful place this is! Oh, I'm so glad that I came along! But that something far deeper than that happens, he becomes convinced of the fact that he is, in the first three verses of Ephesians 2, following the devices and desires of his own heart and the cravings of his natural being, and that he's dead in his trespasses and in his sins, and he can't do anything to get out of it. And he'll be convicted of the fact that he is a sinner. And verse 25, the secrets of his heart will be laid bare.

He'll be going, How in the world did this guy know this about me? I've never been there before! How could it be that this Word of God, this ancient book, has pared back my life and shown me as I am? And then, look what happens. He will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, My, what a wonderful building! No. My, he says, God is really among you.

I want to say to you, you are much of the committed nucleus of our church. Loved ones, do not let a day in your week go by but that you pray for this to be the case within these walls--that men and women would come within this place, and because we live differently, they would be confronted with this amazing truth. I am a sinner.

The secrets of my heart are laid bare. I must fall and worship before him, because God is truly among you. There is no spectatorism in that.

There is no performance in that. There is no preoccupation with man in that. It is all God.

And it is only the Spirit of God that brings it about. There is no program to manufacture it. There is no course to which you may go.

It is only when God comes and moves by his Spirit. Some of us have been privileged to experience it. Not all.

But for all of us, we may pray to that end. And if you want to see people whose lives are embedded in sin coming to the truth and the awareness of themselves and the possibility of liberation, then you must--we must--prepare to worship differently. That my life would be a sacrifice of praise, that my singing would be

real, that my praying--I would pray every phrase with whoever prays from the front--that I would enter wholeheartedly into it all, so that people may fall down and say, God is truly there.

For remember, he has exalted above all things his name and his Word. Can I ask you tonight, are you prepared? Am I prepared for that kind of commitment? I say to you, loved ones, if our worship services are devoid of this kind of unseen reality, breaking through the routine and the slick methodology that we can create because we're really quite good--if our worship services are devoid of that which brings eternity into the hearts of men and women--then, frankly, I don't blame them for walking out of the door saying, Why should I bother? Why should I care? Why would they bother? Why would they care? The only thing that would make them bother and care is this phrase, 1 Corinthians 14.25, God is surely among you. Things happen to me today that can only be explained in terms of God.

That is what we look for. And finally, if we're going to live differently before the watching world in the public domain, and we're going to live differently within the context of the worshiping community, I need to ask myself, Am I prepared to live differently in the context of my private life? Am I prepared to bring my life into line with the demands of the gospel? Am I prepared to bring my life into contact with a sad and weary world? In other words, when we think about these issues, when we drive in the car, the things that we say to ourselves that God hears, Am I as real in my car as I am in my pulpit? Am I as honest about this issue as I appear to be tonight? Every day they pass me by, and I can see it in their eye, lonely people filled with care, careless people filled with pride, sinful people filled with fear, addicted people filled with drugs, empty people filled with nothing, homosexual people filled with longings. You committed enough to do something about it, or shall we just continue to live in a confused world as part of a compromised church, forgetting that we have a clear Bible and reminded that God looks for committed people? Let us bow together in a moment.

Just take a moment in the silence of your heart to respond to this. I don't know to whom I speak. There may be some here tonight, and you've come because someone told you that this subject would be addressed, and your life is one of those experiences, and you long for that kind of change.

We've got people here tonight who can help you. And this prayer room on my right is open, and we'll be glad to come and pray with you. We're not going to unscramble all your life in five minutes, but we can sure introduce you to the one who can unscramble it for you.

Father, grant that the things we long for that are truly of your Spirit you may be pleased to give us, because we know that you delight to give good gifts to your children. Liberate the captives. Set us free from our pride and selfish preoccupations.

Make us by your Spirit the kind of place in which men and women will encounter the reality and power of Christ. And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God our Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest and remain with each one today and forevermore. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH, write to us at Post Office Box 39-8000, Cleveland, Ohio 44139, or visit us online at truthforlife.org. Truth For Life, where the learning is for living.

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