

...They're party poopers

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[0 : 00] you've come to the second of our three series talks. And the title of today's talk is that the problem with Christians is that they are party poopers. I'm sure we've all heard that criticism before, perhaps not the exact same phrase, but variants of it, like Christians are wowsers or Christians are wet blankets. They really need to get a life. And I suppose at the most superficial of levels, it's possible to see why. After all, good Christians don't smoke. They don't do drugs. They don't get themselves smashed every weekend at clubs and pubs. They're the only ones still abstaining from sex before marriage. They frown on crude and obscene jokes, even though it's funny. And they wouldn't step anywhere near a strip club or go on a boys' boozy weekend in Bali. But what really gets to people, I think, is not just that they don't do these things, they abstain from them, but actually that they insist on foisting these things onto others as well, these restrictions. And they keep going on about sin, judgment, and hell. The ultimate caricature of this, of course, I think is the doomsday preacher with his sandwich board, like the one on the slide. If ever there was an image that best describes the Christian as a party pooper, then this would be it. And if this is what it's like to be a Christian, then who will want to be one, right? Who will want to worship a God that's nasty and vindictive, who's always trying to rob us of enjoyment in life. But look a little closer in the Bible, and I don't think that's the picture that we get at all, either of Christians or of the God that we worship. Instead, it may surprise you to discover that the Bible is full of parties. You only have to listen to that first reading by Katie in Genesis chapter 2, describing life in the Garden of Eden, paradise. There's no sense there, is there, that God is vindictive or nasty or out to spoil our fun. In fact, he goes to great lengths to create a paradise, lush and abundant, a place of true enjoyment for Adam and Eve.

And I wonder whether you noticed that last sentence there in verse 25. What did it say? It said, Adam and Eve were naked and had no shame. This is the world's very first nudist colony.

And God was certainly not frowning upon them, was he? Telling them to cover up? No, he wasn't doing any of that. In fact, it was Adam and Eve who did the covering up themselves in the very next chapter.

So as we read on in the Bible, we actually find that this pattern continues. Over and over, we find examples of God wanting to bless his people and showing them how to have the good life. And often, they're accompanied with images of feasting and drinking, of partying and enjoyment. You see, even Jesus himself was no stranger to parties. In fact, John tells us in his gospel that the very first miracle that he did was at the wedding in Cana, right? Where what happened? He turned water into wine, not wine into water.

And what's more, Jesus actually did it right at the end of the party, when perhaps people have already had too much to drink. Elsewhere in the gospels, we find that Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and prostitutes, much to the ire of the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees.

[3 : 52] Once he told a parable which likened following him, that is to be his disciple, as accepting an invitation to a great party or banquet. In other words, he's saying to become a Christian is to accept an offer to a fantastic party.

And finally, when he chose to institute a lasting reminder of his death, what we call the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate once a month here. This is the most significant and momentous act in Christian history or human history.

What did he do it with? He used bread and wine. And why did he do that? I think he did it in order to remind us that what Christians have to look forward to when he comes again is an age of never-ending and joyous celebration. One great party.

In other words, God's going to throw the greatest party ever. And every other party on earth will pale into comparison. And if you care to look at the end of the Bible in Revelation 19 to 21, that's the exact picture you'll find.

There God tells us that he's united his son Jesus with his church through Jesus' death. And all those who accept that invitation feast at this great wedding feast forever and ever.

[5 : 13] And so it isn't true then, is it, that Christians are against parties. We're not party poobers, no. Rather, it's the fact that we're very choosy about the parties that we go to.

We seek out only the very best parties. And the party that we've got our eye on is the one that God is going to throw. You see, when you've tasted the best wine in the world, I haven't really, but if you have, would you go back to the cheap wines that's on offer?

The \$4 ones at Safeway? Nothing wrong with the wines at Safeway. And if you work for Safeway, that's okay. Would you drink instant coffee when you've had good espresso?

I'm sure a lot of people would say they won't. Now, maybe if you don't have a choice, yeah, all right, instant coffee, just to keep me away. But if you had the choice, would you drink instant coffee when you can have espresso?

No. And so it is with God that once you've tasted how good he is and experienced the joy he brings, the satisfaction he gives, then all the other options no longer have that appeal anymore.

[6 : 27] And after all, we've seen what the alternatives are like. Whether it's material riches or sensual pleasures, these things don't ultimately satisfy. Now, of course, they may look enticing at first, and you might even experience an initial euphoria.

But after the initial high comes the low, the unavoidable low. And it's actually how every addiction works, isn't it?

Whether it's drugs, alcohol, computer games, whatever. They look attractive and enticing at first. But little do we realize that once we're hooked onto it, we crave more and more of it, and yet at the very same time, we get less and less out of it.

The law of diminishing returns that soon. Now, we may not have any of these addictions, but I think many of us still chase after fleeting desires and pleasures.

We chase after the approval of others, the acceptance by our peers, or we catch things like the trouble bug and we chase after experiences by going overseas, or else we obsess over achieving a perfect body image.

[7 : 41] And yet, no matter how much we sort of pursue these things and how much we achieve, they're never quite satisfied, do they? Even when we get what we want, we always want more, and then we get the letdown or the disappointment that follows.

But what God offers is entirely different. Because He created us, He actually knows what we need, what will truly make us happy.

And what we need most of all, first and foremost, is actually God Himself. What we need is to know Him and be known by Him, to be in relationship with Him, to live under His authority, yes, but then to find joy in His presence.

David captured it perfectly in one of his Psalms, Psalm 16. I wonder if you could turn to it with me, page 542. We wouldn't have time to read it all, but I'll read a couple of verses.

So, page 542. So, David begins, he says in verse 1, Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.

[8 : 49] I say to the Lord, you are my Lord, apart from you I have no good thing. And then after he goes through the Psalm, describing what it's like to have this life, have God in His life, to have God, he ends with this verse in verse 11.

You, God, make known to me, you make known to me the path of life. You will fill me with joy in your presence, and with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

In other translations, it says, pleasures evermore. So, to be in God's presence is actually to be enjoying eternal pleasures, never-ending pleasures.

And so, if there ever was a party that we mustn't miss, the party we should try and get ourselves into, then I think this is it.

This is the party that I want. Joy in God's presence, eternal pleasures at His right hand. But of course, there is a problem, because one thing that stands in our way, like that immovable bouncer at that party door, this guy, oh, didn't come out, sorry.

[10 : 01] It's a picture of a very scary guy. But anyway, he's barring us, the bouncer is barring us from entering God's presence. And no matter what excuse we give to this bouncer, whatever stunt we try and pull, there's no way that we can get in on our own.

Now, what is this bouncer that's stopping us getting in? Well, it's actually our very own rebellion against God, our pride and our arrogance, which makes us think that, no, we don't need Him, that we can make it on our own without God.

This is what the Bible actually calls sin, that brings God's judgment, that puts everyone in danger of hell. Oh, there you go again, Mark, talking about sin, judgment, and hell.

Those party-pooing words that turn people off Christians. After all, who are Christians to judge others? What right have they to decide who's good enough and who's not good enough to get in?

Why can't they just accept others and be loving to all? Well, let me respond to that. To begin with, Christians aren't saying that they're the good ones and that others aren't, and that's why they can get in.

[11 : 13] No, the fact is no one is good enough. No one gets past this immovable bouncer called sin. But secondly, it isn't Christians who are saying these things at all.

Rather, Jesus is the one that makes these statements Himself. Listen to what He says in Mark 9, verse 47 and 48. It should be on the screen, I hope. Yeah.

Jesus says this, Jesus talks about hell.

And then in Revelation 21-27, in the very chapters that actually God talks about this celestial party, we also hear these very warnings. Nothing impure will enter into it.

That is the city where God is holding this party. Nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. And again in Revelation 20-15, it says this, Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of hell or the lake of fire.

[12 : 27] This is what Jesus is saying. This is what the Bible is saying, not just Christians. Now these are not comforting words by any means. I have to grant you that. But as Christians, we're simply passing on what we believe to be true.

Now Christians are not immune to these warnings. No, it's not like we are birthed them. It applies to us just as it does to everyone else. But there's no point trying to sugarcoat any of these words, are there, is there?

To shy away from the truth. Say you're a patient and you've got cancer. What would you want your doctor to do? To give you the honest truth or to comfort you by telling you a lie?

You want them to give you the honest truth, don't you? Even though it may not be comforting at all. C.S. Lewis has this paragraph in his book, Mere Christianity. I've got, oh, I didn't bring up the book table, but there are, I've got copies of it at the book table outside.

And this is what he says. Of course, I quite agree that the Christian religion is in the long run a thing of unspeakable comfort.

[13 : 34] But it does not begin in comfort. It begins in the dismay I have been describing. And it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay.

Now, the dismay that Lewis is referring to is the realization that there's simply nowhere to run from God. That much as we wish, we can't hide from him. Because of our pride and our arrogance, because of our pride and our arrogance, God is actually the last person we want to meet, Lewis says.

And yet the truth is, he's the very person we need in order to find life. And so he goes on, on the next slide, in religion as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it.

If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth. Only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with.

And in the end, despair. Now, sadly, I think that's what many people in society are doing today.

[14 : 45] You see them busy going from one thing in life to another. Looking for comfort. Finding all manner of ways to distract themselves so that they never have to face up to this truth.

And I'm not just talking about parties or clubbing or whatever. It could be any number of other distractions as well. It could be sport. It could be theatre. It could be the gym. It could be holidays, food, chasing girls or guys, playing the share market, investing in property.

It may even be signing up for self-help courses or motivational talks to help you discover your life's calling. But none of these things actually bring us to the truth because we never confront the one thing that stands in our way that stops us getting to God and that is sin.

And sin doesn't just refer to our misdeeds or misdemeanors. No. At its very core, sin refers to our pride and our rebellion against God.

If we never confront that sin, we will never find true joy and satisfaction. Now, it's at this very point that I need to make something very clear because it may be that you've just heard the word sin and immediately the connection you make is that God, what God demands of you is to try harder, to become a better person, to do penance, to make amends so that you square up that ledger, right?

[16 : 13] Balance out your bad deeds with your good. It's like being transported back to that time in detention where you have to do the time to pay for your crime.

Well, if that's what you're thinking, then let me stop you there right away because that's absolutely not what God is thinking of. And personally, I couldn't think of a more soul-destroying thing. If that is what God wanted, then He is ultimately the greatest party pooper.

Because there's no hope in debt for any of us. And without hope, there's no joy. But this isn't what God desires at all. No, instead what He wants is for us to recognize that there's actually nothing, absolutely nothing that we can do by ourselves.

What He desires instead is that we put our faith in Jesus. Because Jesus is the only one who will make things right on our behalf. He's the one who has laid down His life for us.

Paid for it on our behalf and made amends for our sin. And we heard that in our second reading tonight in John chapter 10, verse 9 and 10. I'll put those words again on the slide.

[17 : 24] Jesus said, I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. And then in verse 11, He says, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. And so Jesus is both the gate and the great shepherd. And what He wants is for us to come to Him, to enter into God's presence through faith in Him.

When the bouncer sees Jesus, he steps aside because of Him. And we get to follow Jesus into the party after Him. That's how we will have life and have it to the full.

So there's no need to take off a to-do checklist. No need to atone for our guilt or rack up heaps and heaps of good behavior points.

All we need to do, and the only thing we can do actually, is to humbly admit that we've gone our own way and now we want to turn back to God's way.

[18 : 27] That's what repentance means. And yet, if you ask people today, I think the general impression they have is that to be a Christian, all they need to do or what they need to do is to lead a pious life.

I think that's why you hear people say, I don't think I can be good enough to be a Christian or I've done so many bad things, I don't think God will let me into His church. Or if I step foot into the church, I'm afraid that God will strike me down with lightning.

But the Christian life is actually one of grace. Living under God's grace. Not trying harder, not trying to be a good person, but actually living under His grace and being forgiven for all that we've done and what we will do, in fact.

And the joy and the freedom then comes from knowing that forgiveness. You know, even though I had grown up in a church, it took me a long while to understand this.

It took me a while to understand what it means to live under God's grace. For a while, I still thought that Christianity was all about being good. I was still comparing myself with others to see if I was better than them, taking pride that I was actually better than them, not like that scum or whatever, that I was less sinful than they were.

[19 : 50] But the point of it was that although I was trying hard, it wasn't enjoyable or fun at all, particularly as I was looking and thinking, oh, I'm missing out on so much of life just by trying to be good, to live this whatever imaginary pious life that I thought God wanted.

And so it was really wonderful when I realized that the Christian life is not about living a pious, party-pooping life. Rather, God welcomes me on Christ's account.

I didn't have to try harder or keep comparing myself to some impossible standard. I didn't need to pretend that I was holier than I really was. And when I realized that, it was absolutely freeing.

And the other amazing thing that happened when I realized that was that it brought me contentment in life. I could truly be thankful for what God had done in my life. Whether I had little or much, whether I had achieved little or much who I was, who I had in my life, I became thankful.

I didn't feel like I was missing out on life. Instead, now, if you ask me, it feels like I'm having the time of my life because of Jesus.

[21 : 12] And that I'm actually part of the best party in the world. So friends, can I honestly say to you that if you haven't got Jesus in your life, if you haven't committed to following Him, then this is the honest truth.

You're still at the wrong party. Even if things seem to be going well for you at this stage, one day, the music will stop. The only party to be at is the one where Jesus is in your life.

So can I urge you, if tonight you're still thinking about that, come, ask questions afterwards, come to the course at Christianity Explored, but come to Jesus who said, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

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Thank you.