

Week 8: Decisions

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. -Thomas Nagel¹

There are many identities and labels that we might carry around that each have varying degrees of significance to us. For example, I (the author) am ethnically Han Chinese. For me personally, this is largely circumstantial and doesn't really matter to me- it is at most a cultural reference point for my food preferences and the fact that I take off my shoes when I enter my house, but is otherwise insignificant. However, another identity that I have is being a father to my children: this dictates my schedule, budget, and lifestyle choices. It would be very strange if, after my child was born, my lifestyle remained completely identical to the life I lived as a single person or as a non-father. Is "being a Christian" more like my incidental ethnic identity or more like my life-constraining relational identity as a father?

If belief in Jesus Christ were not of very much consequence, there would probably not be as much controversy around the person of Jesus as there currently is (i.e. there would be no reason to fear religion). We've tried to emphasize that Christianity is primarily a truth claim rather than a lifestyle (see Chapter 1), but as the quote from Professor Nagel emphasizes, the lifestyle implications of Christianity are not wholly independent of accepting Christianity (see also the Chapter 4 appendix). If we were completely rational, the inconvenient implications of our beliefs would not influence whether or not we believe in something- however, it is also fairly obvious that we are not completely rational. For example, most of us find it unsurprising that climate change denial has been funded by those with large financial interests in fossil fuels² (though of course, locating the motivator of a belief is not equivalent with disproving a belief³). How can anyone deny clear evidence? When there is much to lose and much to gain, it becomes at least understandable.

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, 1997

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ExxonMobil_climate_change_controversy

³ AKA the genetic fallacy. The origin of a belief does not necessarily say anything about its truth value.

With that said, we will examine in this chapter what “being Christian” means or implies about one’s life.

What being a Christian is not

It will help us to first clear up some common misunderstandings about what being a Christian is *not*, so that going through what it does mean can avoid some confusion. For this next section, we should note that our intent is not to necessarily cause panic in people who may find themselves identified by any one or more of these “not-quite-Christian” categories. If any of these apply to you and you still consider yourself a Christian, take this as an opportunity to establish a more robust foundation for your faith by doing some honest self-evaluation⁴. Once again we will reiterate: the likeability or convenience of a truth claim has very little to do with its being true.

“I was born a Christian”

Consider the following verses that specifically challenge “faith by birth”:

*12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*⁵

*8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*⁶

In other words, the Bible seems to say that faith is not “genetic.” Starting in a Christian family with a Christian worldview may make you more inclined to become Christian (depending on your family, it might also make you LESS inclined), but being raised in a Christian household is not equivalent to being a Christian.

“I go to church every Sunday” / “I live a morally upright life with conservative values”

Remember the Pharisees, the zealous religious adherents who lived morally upright lives with conservative values? Jesus didn’t exactly approve of their religious lifestyle⁷ and he spent much of his time seemingly intentionally trying to challenge their strict rule adherence. We don’t want this to turn into a study about why this is the case (see chapter 6 for more on this), but consider the following:

⁴ Or, [“work out your salvation with fear and trembling”](#)

⁵ [John 1:12-13 NIV](#)

⁶ [Matthew 3:8-9 NIV](#)

⁷ See [Matthew 23](#)

13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”⁸

Jesus explicitly states they were not entering heaven (and were having a role in preventing others from doing so) which means strict religious observance is not what Jesus wants from people, nor is it a guarantor of salvation.

“I give intellectual assent to the doctrines of Christianity”

James challenges this issue directly in his epistle:

19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.⁹

So unless being Christian and being a malevolent spiritual being are equivalent in God’s sight, having accurate theology doesn’t necessarily indicate anything about your standing with God.

“I had a powerful emotional experience (typically crying after some music or around a campfire) or raised my hand during a dedication time”

While having the above experience doesn’t mean you’re not Christian, it does not necessarily mean you are one either. Certainly, given the significance of the decision, becoming a Christian will probably have some kind of emotional impact for most people, but we are trying to distinguish between an authentic response to something and the response itself substituting for something authentic.

What being a Christian is not not

There are a lot of ways of defining authentic Christianity: “do vs done,” “relationship vs religion”... okay so maybe there’s really like two ways, both of which are trying to emphasize the fact that salvation is by grace rather than religious activity. While that distinction is certainly an important part of Christian belief, these sorts of clichés do not necessarily give a complete picture of faith according to the Bible. One might actually lose sight of the more difficult or challenging aspects of a life of faith if you stop at a definition of faith that is merely opposed to legalism without any other context. The book of James refers to this directly:

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

⁸ [Matthew 23:13 ESV](#)

⁹ [James 2:19 NIV](#)

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.¹⁰

Jesus himself talks on the same subject in the Sermon on the Mount:

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."¹¹

Of particular note, technically speaking, Jesus is referring to judgment that someone who fails to "do" what Jesus said ought to expect (v. 26) while simultaneously distinguishing this from merely doing religious activities (v.21-23)¹².

With that in mind, we are going to try to make the case that a Christian is someone who, in believing and personally accepting the cross, listens to what Jesus had been saying from the very beginning of his ministry: "Repent,"¹³ and "Follow me."¹⁴ Missing either part of these commands results in an incomplete view of the normative Christian life.

Repentance

The following is a stupid true story.

Once I drove and chaperoned some high school students on a trip to the American River, which is about a 2 hour drive from the city we were leaving from. Part of my job was making sure they stayed alive, which was fairly exhausting. Afterward, I helped them set up a campsite, but I had a job interview the next day so I started to drive back home at around 8 p.m. And then I went up the "on ramp" on the left to get on the I-80 interstate.

¹⁰ [James 2:14-18 ESV](#)

¹¹ [Matthew 7:21-27 ESV](#)

¹² This is mainly for people who grew up in church with a bad definition of "legalism," which we know we're not supposed to like. However, "legalism" and "having a proper response indicative of saving faith" are not the same thing.

¹³ See [Matthew 4:17](#)

¹⁴ See [Luke 9:23](#)



It's so gentle and slopey and "on-rampy" and stuff. What else could that be on the left?

After a little while, I noticed that all the little bump thingies dividing the lanes were reflecting bright red and all the signs said "WRONG WAY" on them in red. My initial thought was to get offended, and I thought to myself, "How do you know?"

When I realized what was going on (I was heading towards oncoming traffic on the freeway at 80-90 mph) I immediately pulled over on the shoulder, turned around, and started back on the right way. Now imagine if, after I had discovered I was headed the wrong way, I had kept going and told myself, "let's see where this takes me?" or "I've gone this far, it would be a waste for me to stop now." Part of the Christian confession of faith is the recognition that your life, whatever you were doing, is going the wrong way. Repentance, then, is reversing your course once you realize you're going the wrong way:

17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.¹⁵

¹⁵ [Galatians 2:17-21 ESV](#)

In the above passage, Paul clarifies that the grace of God is not a license to continue in sin- but neither is it attempting to obligate God through religious acts. Instead, the proper response to the grace given in the cross is to repent, or reverse, from our former way of life, and instead live a different life (which we will now talk about).

“Follow me [to the cross]”

As we began talking about in chapter 7, one aspect of the cross that any believer needs to acknowledge is that Jesus asks people to have the same kind of life (that is, one of sacrifice for the sake of others). Consider the following statement that Jesus gives to “all” that would follow him (and not just honor roll Christians¹⁶):

23 Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”¹⁷

Jesus calls attention to the fact that what he demands (i.e. everything) is bound to be lost anyways when you die and what he promises in return lasts forever. The verse describing this strange reversal of saving vs. losing one’s life is played out whenever anyone would choose anything in this life as more valuable, as “not worth it” compared to the promise that Jesus gives. We will look at a few of the interactions that Jesus has with people who were NOT ready to accept this exchange:

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” 60 And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61 Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” 62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

It seems that Jesus did recognize such a thing as people who were “willing” to follow him, but not actually ready in that they had a wrong perception of what following Jesus would look like. In short, Jesus wanted people to know that the life he called them to was uncomfortable, took priority over familial obligations, even culturally sacrosanct ones, and did not have room for any kind of hesitation. Many preachers will try to defang this by saying something like, “of course we don’t have the strength to do this- that’s why there’s grace.” While that’s pretty comforting, I’m not so sure that this matches with what Jesus actually teaches. Rather, if we take this

¹⁶ This is a bad joke, just in case that wasn’t clear

¹⁷ [Luke 9:23-25 NIV](#)

¹⁸ [Luke 9:57-62 ESV](#)

passage at face value, Jesus is saying, “count the cost”- evaluate whether or not this is something you’re actually ready for. One thing is clear: these people plainly expressed an interest in following Jesus, and Jesus clearly told them no! In other words, the call that Jesus gave seems to entail a little bit more than raising your hand while everyone’s eyes are closed when the teacher asks who wants to accept Jesus into their heart¹⁹. Consider also the story of the rich ruler:

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him.

“Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.

19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

20 “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22 At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”²⁰

This interaction is examined in the following diagram:

¹⁹ For the unchurched person: this is a caricature of every youth retreat ever... the point being that such an environment is aimed at making becoming a Christian easy, whereas Jesus himself sought to declare plainly that this was not the case.

²⁰ [Mark 10:17-27 NIV](#)



Meme credit: Andy Ju

It's tempting to think that this command to sell everything and follow Jesus was unique to this one person, since that would be easier to stomach, but again, Jesus is saying in this passage the exact same thing he says to everyone else (consider the fact that the disciples that were already following him had left everything, but their "everything" was of less financial value- also see verses below). There are many interesting things in this story: what's necessary to be saved via commandments, Jesus' divinity (and sense of humor²¹), as well as this interesting verse about being rich that rich people don't like to look at. We're not going to focus on anything except for the fact that, when given the choice, this rich man forfeits eternal life for his finite wealth: now that he's been dead for several thousand years, it's easier to see in hindsight that this wasn't a very good trade assuming he never changed his mind. I also want to point out that some would read v.26-27 as Jesus saying the "but God has grace on us even if you can't do these things" message, which could be true, but in context probably means that God would

²¹ One way to view v.18: Jesus is kind of messing with him with the comment about no one being good but God alone, in that Jesus asking "why" is a very strong hint that Jesus is actually God.

make it possible for a rich man to renounce everything rather than saying that with God, renouncing everything doesn't have to apply to everyone. Just in case this isn't abundantly clear, we will look at yet one more passage describing this call:

25 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."²²

Because we live in a tolerant society where being Christian does not come with much cost other than (somewhat ironically) being thought of as intolerant, we are prone to thinking that this type of language from Jesus must be hyperbolic. However, Christians throughout history and in some parts of the world today face persecution, loss of property, or even loss of life for becoming a Christian: why should we think that the cost for an American ought to be lower than someone in North Korea or Afghanistan²³? Maybe the real difference between Christians in those countries with heavy persecution and those of us in the western world is simply that we are much more like the rich man who would walk away sad, if we were really honest with confronting the choice Jesus issues.

Jesus uses the language of basic accounting to analogize what it means to count the cost of being a Christian: this shouldn't be a hasty decision made after crying in front of a campfire. Rather, the kind of decision that Jesus is talking about is one that's made after deliberation: do you think you are a righteous enough person that you should enter into heaven on your own merit? If not, the "terms of peace" are this: complete surrender to Jesus. However, it is also true that because Jesus made and loves you, what he tells you to do will be for your ultimate benefit, like a parent instructing his or her child²⁴.

The cost of not following Jesus

²² [Luke 14:25-33 ESV](#)

²³ Jayson Casper, The Top 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to be a Christian, Retrieved from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/top-christian-persecution-open-doors-2020-world-watch-list.html> on 5/7/2020

²⁴ In this case, without all the bad stuff an imperfect human parent carries around.

Up to this point, we've taken pains to highlight the fact that Jesus plainly spoke about the fact that there is a cost to following him. At the same time, from the Luke 9 passage cited above (see footnote 17), we would also like to talk about this simple fact: there is also a cost of not-following Jesus. What is worth more? Is your soul, your very self, your life, on the one hand, worth more, or is whatever you might lose should you decide to follow Jesus, even your entire body of material wealth and comfort, worth more?

Consider the following decision matrix copied from the Wikipedia article on Pascal's Wager²⁵

	God exists (G)	God does not exist ($\neg$ G)
Belief (B)	$+\infty$ (infinite gain)	$-c$ (finite loss)
Disbelief ($\neg$ B)	$-\infty$ (infinite loss)	$+c$ (finite gain)

This matrix summarizes the existential crisis that every human being faces when it comes to the decision point of God. If God does not actually exist, but I live a life with the false belief that God does exist, I have lost only the sorts of pleasure that are immoral according to God during my earthly life. However, if God is real, and I have a false belief that he does not exist, then I have lost everything: I have actually lost more than the material universe is able to offer.

This might be a little hard for us to process given our typically earthbound, short term view of life. As a thought experiment, imagine a guy who thinks that the walls of his high school were the boundaries of the universe: he invests his heart and soul in the high school drama of popularity contests, relationship/dating drama, etc. That can certainly "feel real," and to a certain degree, we do have to interact with it and live with it for at least 4 years so we can't just check out. But let's also say that this particular guy in our experiment decides that the drama feels so important, that he invests all his time and energy to make sure he's very popular while ignoring things like his grades and SAT preparation, which seem less real to him because they are in the nebulous "later". However, what is actually real is going to catch up with him: his popularity and cool appeal aren't going to matter once college decisions come out his senior year. After his 4 short years are up, that high school life is going to be completely irrelevant: imagine if he were 30 years old and still basking in whatever glory he had in 11th grade while living in his mom's basement. Most of us who attend a decent college understand that this imaginary guy has made a bad decision: high school isn't going to last forever while the college you attend is going to affect your career and overall life trajectory for many more years afterwards. The exchange of the short-lived high school popularity for the quality of the rest of his life is a poor one.

²⁵Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_wager#Analysis_with_decision_theory on 5/7/2020. Note: this article makes some claims that, I hope, the rest of CTPT has shown to be completely groundless, such as their challenge that the existence of God has no scientific evidence (See chapter 2 for a lot of science that apparently someone on wikipedia has never bothered to look at).

Of course, that's not entirely analogous because of the difference in the level of certainty of what's coming. Perhaps we should also add that if this guy who is basking in his high school life has an extremely low chance of getting entrance into any college, or maybe even a chance of zero, then maybe it is rational for him to try to get a little bit of pleasure out of what is otherwise going to be a bad situation. This is why it is important to consider all of the evidence we have thus far offered in the previous chapters combined, which for reasons we discussed in chapter 5 must necessarily remain ambiguous.

Nevertheless, it is still frustrating, even if you concede that the uncertainty needs to be present. When you are in that position of figuring out what you're going to do with the rest of your life, when you're confronted with this simultaneous challenge and promise of "losing your life to gain it," you want certainty: when I was thinking through this myself as an atheist, I even thought it would be simpler if Christianity were just obviously false so I wouldn't have to deal with this decision anymore. Is everything we know and love a cosmic accident doomed to oblivion in an uncaring universe, within which we must find some temporary consolation? Or has the whole universe been leading up to this exact decision point for each one of us, meaning that there never has been such a thing as an accident in God's hands? Either position requires some amount of faith (that is, trust in what is unseen- not credulity) to believe, and each choice will cost us the other.

But if it helps, consider the fact that in terms of your earthly life, you're going to lose it anyways (eventually). Your life is a depreciating asset. What Jesus wants is not for his followers to have less, but rather more: he has a scope and perspective on life that exceeds our own. Going back to that high schooler thought experiment, you might imagine that if you were the friend or parent of the high-school-is-life person and cared for him, you'd probably try to convince him to drop the drama and think about his future because high school is short, and the rest of your life is a lot longer. In the same way, because Jesus cares about you, he wants you to invest your life properly: life as a whole is very short, and eternity is everlasting:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."²⁶

The Christian missionary Jim Elliot, who was martyred at the age of 28 while putting these words of Jesus into practice²⁷, wrote the following:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose

²⁶ [Matthew 6:19-21 ESV](#)

²⁷ The Huaorani group that Elliot and his fellow missionaries were trying to reach largely became Christian afterwards, including several of the killers: see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/september16/missionaries-did-they-have-to-die.html>

That quote might have been a kind of a nice ending if I left it there, but instead of making this nice, I'd rather end with this: what about you? What do you choose to gain, and what do you choose to lose?