

Christian Injustice, Hypocrisy, and Looniness  
Pastor Larry Kroon  
Wasilla Bible Church  
July 05, 2009

You take a herring, you salt it, you smoke it, you cure it, and it will turn reddish in color; it will develop a very strong smell. And for some people, the taste is good. What you end up with is what is called a red herring. There's a story about red herrings, and it's maybe legend; we don't know, I don't know for sure. But the story is that hunters used to use red herrings to train their dogs to hunt. They would use them...they would come to a trail, or they would take their dogs out and the dogs would be wanting to track rabbits or fox or whatever. And the hunters would take those red herring and they would drag them across the trail; so when the dogs were chasing down that rabbit scent and they were running down the trail of the rabbit they would suddenly hit that smell of that red herring, that strong smell of the red herring. And they would be tempted to veer off and chase the smell that was left by those herrings drug through the woods. The challenge then was for the trainer to train the dogs to ignore that smell and go with the fainter scent of that rabbit or that fox. And so they were trained to do that, and they would use red herrings to help them do that, to not be distracted by strong smells other than the scent they were chasing.

That story led to the term 'red herring' being used in the arena of debate and argument. It came to refer to any argument that distracted from the main issue. Any time there's a debate going and they're trying to wrestle with the central thesis and something is thrown in that distracts from that main line of thought, that main argument, it's called a 'red herring'. If you look up a dictionary on fallacies, logical fallacies, you will find 'red herring' listed and it'll refer to it as any argument in which the premises are logically unrelated to the conclusion. Now there's all kinds of subspecies of red herrings in terms of logical fallacies, and one of the more common is called an 'ad hominem'. It means 'against the man'. And this is where, if you're listening to an argument and, frankly, maybe you're losing the argument, one of the tactics is to begin to attack the other person—not his argument, but the person. For example, somebody might say that the Declaration of Independence is a flawed document because Thomas Jefferson had a plantation with slaves. It's distracting from the argument...it's just running after a red herring.

Red herring arguments are not valid. They're not valid, but they're extremely powerful. They will not win an argument logically, but they will often sway things emotionally. And of all the challenges addressed against Christianity, of all the things that are used to create doubt in people's minds when they're wrestling with the truth of Christianity, one of the most powerful, if not the most exasperatingly powerful ones, is a red herring. The particular red herring is often put this way when we're discussing Christianity, and it will be a challenge that is voiced something like this. It'll say that Christian injustice, hypocrisy, and just plain looniness, are all good reasons to doubt the Christian claims concerning Jesus.

Now, sometimes that argument will be shouted at you. You will be drowned out by somebody saying "I don't want to hear you. It's all a bunch of hypocrisy. The church is nothing but hypocrites." Other times it'll be...it'll be more sober, and a person will tell a story of being let down by a parent who loved Jesus but didn't love their kid. It's a powerful red herring.

Oftentimes the accusations are unfair. They are rooted in a misunderstanding of what authentic Christianity is. Sometimes it's just simply there's a lack of awareness of all the facts, and somebody's being accused of something even when they just don't understand everything that goes into the situation they're looking at. Other times there's just a total disregard to examples to the contrary. Sometimes it's just very deliberate manipulation of the argument. We see that in politics a lot...start throwin' mud at the other candidate and hopefully something will stick. Oftentimes the arguments are unfair.

But sometimes the accusations are spot-on accurate. Sometimes the accusations are spot-on accurate. You wanna talk injustice? There were professed Christians involved in the Salem witch trials. There were professed Christians that compromised with the Nazis in Hitler's Germany. And there were professed Christians on both sides of the genocide in Rwanda. Christian injustice? Yes, you'll find it. We've become so accustomed to high profile Christian leaders—either behind the pulpit or in politics or some other public arena—failing that we no longer blink when we see the headlines. 'Oh, another one.' The proverbial Christian who is a saint on Sunday and a scoundrel on Monday through Saturday—the Bible actually tells us not only is that gonna happen, it's gonna get worse the nearer we are to the end.

And oh, do we have our share of wackiness. Sometimes it's tragic—the Christian parent who withholds treatment to their dying child, and watches their child die while they claim a miracle from God for that child. Other times it's simply silly—a group of people dressed in white robes on top of a mountain on a certain date in a certain year because somebody told 'em Jesus is gonna show up. The real wackiness is they walked down the mountain still believin' the guy that told 'em, even though Jesus never showed.

Sometimes the accusations are unfair; sometimes the accusations are spot-on accurate. Either way, the argument is not valid. The argument is not valid. The Christian claim is not about you or me, or any other Christian. It's about Jesus, and He is the issue. All these accusations are red herrings drug across the trail.

The Christian position...and I love this passage in Timothy where Paul is actually quoting what appears to be an early church hymn, and one of the closing lines of the hymn goes like this:

*If we are faithless...*

In other words, if we are not reliable, if we fall down, if we just are disaster, almost...

*...He remains faithful...*

He remains reliable, He remains true...

*...for He cannot deny Himself.*

He cannot be other than what He is.

We may be unreliable, but that doesn't mean that He is not [reliable]. Christians—by our behavior and our actions we may draw people to follow that argument and pursue Jesus, or we may distract 'em from the real issue and draw 'em away from Jesus, but we do not prove whether He is real or not. That is Him.

So when we respond to this issue and this challenge to the Christian faith...and we've been working through various challenges throughout this summer. When we come to this particular one, this red herring that says that because of Christian hypocrisy, injustice, and just plain looniness we shouldn't believe the claims concerning Jesus, a response to that should actually come in two areas. One is what I would call a logical response. Don't chase the red herrings. Don't chase 'em. Make a distinction between the messenger and the message, and stay on the message.

It's interesting to me that when Jesus challenged the hypocrites of His day, the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders that had taken control of Judaism at the time, He confronts 'em very dramatically in Matthew 23 and He holds 'em to account. And He's just takin' 'em line by line; just point by point He's challenging their behavior and the inconsistencies of their lives. And you can just see the crowd ready to go "Yes! Yes!" Every time He makes a challenge at 'em you can see the crowd going 'Yeah! Hit 'em again!' Only thing is he started everything by saying to the crowd, 'Do what they say; don't do what they do.' He said 'Make a distinction, in essence, between the message and the messenger. Ignore their behavior; I'm going to address it and I'm going to deal with it,' is what Jesus basically says. 'I'll deal with them. You wrestle with the truth.'

So that's my first statement, is don't chase the red herrings. If you're trying to sort Christianity out, you're trying to make decisions about it, you're hesitant because of the way you've seen some Christians act, things you've seen Christians do, my challenge back is listen, was Jesus unjust? Look at Him. Was He unjust? Was He a hypocrite? And lastly, was He loony? Was He crazy? That's the issue you wrestle with, this person named Jesus...is he what he claimed to be—Lord of all, the Messiah, the chosen leader who would right all wrong? He's the issue. If you're investigating Christianity, you stay on that scent. Don't chase the red herrings.

At the same time, if you're trying to encourage somebody with doubt, somebody who is wrestling, somebody who's become hesitant, I would encourage you to don't chase the red herring yourself. Listen, this was a hard sermon together...because what I wanted to do was to take time to address the accusation of Christian injustice. I wanted to slow us down and I wanted to talk about how if you study statistics and research over history you would begin to compare numbers of how many people have been killed in different acts of injustice; you will find that those killed in Christian acts of injustice are nowhere near those that have been killed by secular societies that have no place for God. You add up those who were killed by Hitler. You add up those who were killed by Stalin. You add up those who were killed in Communist China, who were killed in Cambodia. The numbers don't even compare! And I'd

love to bring in examples of Christians who have stood against injustice. I'd love to address the issues of hypocrisy by showing the countless examples of integrity I've seen in everyday people living out their faith in everyday situations. And I'd love to deal with the issues of just wackiness by pointing to sensible Christians I've seen living out their faith in quality lives. But that's chasing a red herring. And when you deal with this doubt don't start chasing the red herring. Don't become defensive. Just simply bring it back to the main trail, the main issue—was Jesus unjust? Was Jesus a hypocrite? Was Jesus crazy? That's the issue to be addressed; that's the issue to be dealt with.

But you know what? It doesn't work simply to deal with this particular issue on a logical level. We have to be very practical with it. We have to address it beyond words, beyond argument. It will not do to simply say, when somebody shouts out "The church is full of hypocrites!"...it will not do to yell back, "You're dragging a red herring!" They are, but that's not gonna answer the situation. So when we talk about response not only must we deal with the logic...'go ahead, don't chase that red herring, stay on the main issue'...but on a practical level what I would say to all of us as believers—stop dragging the red herrings. Stop dragging the red herrings across the trail.

There's that letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a pastor who was pastoring a small community on an island, and he writes it in the book of Titus, and it's one of my favorite books because he's giving just real practical advice to this pastor. And one of the situations he deals with as he walks through that...he speaks in Titus 1 near the end of the chapter...he speaks to the fact that there's a problem there, and the problem are [is] Christians who profess to be believers, individuals who profess to be Christians, who are not living what they say. He puts it this way...

*They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him...*

Paul points those out. He says this is happening in this area, and he tells this pastor, 'Here's what you gotta do.' And he follows up in the verses that go on for almost the whole next chapter. He gives instructions for what Titus is supposed to do then with all this hypocrisy that's there in that community. And what his advice is, is very practical, very simple. He deals with situations...he says 'listen, our people have to do good.' And he talks about older men and older women. He talks about younger men and younger women. He even talks about servants and slaves. And he says, 'Listen, live out your Christian life in a way...' and the phrase he'll eventually use...he'll use a couple different phrases, but the one that stands out is in verse 10. He says

*...adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.*

Make sure that the way you live and the way you act is such a way that people are attracted to the gospel message, not repelled from it. He gives that same kind of instruction to just everyday Christians like you and I. He doesn't call for a big rally of protest. He doesn't try to teach them logical argumentation on how to deal with red herrings. What he does is simply 'treat your wife and husband a certain way; treat the people you're around in a certain way.' He even tells the slaves, 'listen, don't steal from your masters.' Adorn the message.

Now, we've gotta be careful here, 'cause that doesn't mean we go out and take a...run some focus groups and find out what sort of Christians are really attractive to other people, what sort of things do Christians do that other people say, 'oh, I like that; I'd like to be like that.' No. What we do is we commit to just simply doing what Jesus called us to do, and follow that. See, this is one of those areas where the worst thing we can do is pull back and hesitate. It's where we have to live out the gospel all the more personal, all the more diligently.

There's a book that I worked through this past year. I really enjoyed it. It was a book about the problem of evil. And it ends with a final statement. The author's talking about how all-encompassing and how just powerful the problem of evil is, and it's so overwhelming in our culture with all the media and everything else. We're just overwhelmed with all the examples. And he closes that, you know, we can get overwhelmed and we can say, 'man, there's nothin' I can do about it.' And he quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Russian dissident. And his comment had been...Solzhenitsyn's comment was, "Evil will come, but not through me." I think you need to make this issue that personal, and you need to say as a believer, 'You know, hypocrisy will surface...but not through me. Not through me.' So we have to address this one.

But even as I say that, I gotta admit I get a little discouraged. Of all the challenges to the Christian faith, this is the one that is the most wearisome to me. This is the one that gets me most discouraged. The logic is easy to address. It's easy to say, 'It's a red herring. Here's why. Stay on the main track.' But the countless times I've been in my office and dealt with people where logic doesn't make any difference... What makes a difference to them is how their Christian father abused 'em, or their Christian wife had an affair, or their Christian employee embezzled all their money. Those are real cases I've dealt with. Listen...the logic isn't hard to address, but the

emotion in this one is powerful. I don't mind that blustery challenge, I really don't; that person in the lunchroom who yells out "All you Christians are hypocrites!" I don't mind that bluster. What goes to my core is that young man who's been looking up to a mentor, and he finds out that mentor is rotten to the core; that seeker that desperately wants to find something real in their life, and they have a Christian coworker that cannot stop saying foul, cruel jokes day after day, after day, after day, but is singin' on Sunday. I struggle, because there's examples in my own life of hypocrisy, where I know people have backed away from the faith because they've probably seen failures in me. 'Did you see that pastor speedin' in the Mini Cooper down the road?' We chuckle, but it happens.

Quote...this is by a writer who...Ashley's quoted, I've quoted him; probably one of the best writers I've found in recent decade that addresses a problem of Christian faith in our culture, and people's response to it. His name's Tim Keller, and he makes this statement. And he spent a career in New York City dealing with people on the front edge of intellectual challenge of the faith. He says this; he says

Many people who take an intellectual stand against Christianity do so against a background of personal disappointment with Christians and churches.

Most often when you're gettin' that intellectual challenge there's a backdrop of personal disappointment with churches and Christians behind it. We need to take that personal. We need to say "Not through me." But even then, I don't think that's enough. The only way that I can move forward in the face of this challenge, the only reason I can speak with confidence in the face of this and say it's worth movin' on, and fightin' and takin' this challenge is one core reality, and that's that verse we had earlier—*If we are faithless He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself*. The encouragement I have is Jesus. He has for centuries, and He will continue to make Himself known—His wonder, His mystery, His glory, and His grace. He will continue to make Himself known to people, even when we fail. That's our hope, that person named Jesus.

I wanna confirm that. I wanna focus on that as we stand, and we're gonna close with our closing song. And this is a song that reflects a desire on our congregation's part, as I said during Communion, is to be a witness to the reality of Jesus. And you know what? We can teach it, we can talk it, but there's gotta be somethin' more powerful to it, and that something more powerful needs to be the reality of Jesus, His Spirit let loose in our lives.

[Congregation sings the prayer song]

Go in that truth and go in that grace.