

I'm a Christian because...

I'm messed up

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."
-Matthew 9:12, 13

To those of you who know me I might seem like a pretty good guy. I try hard not to curse, I don't get drunk, I don't sleep around and in general I'm friendly to pretty much everyone I meet. I want to let everyone in on a secret though. I'm not a good guy. I certainly don't think I'm a good guy. I'm messed up, probably more than most people. Knowing I'm imperfect is scary, especially considering that I am a Christian. Jesus says in Matthew, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He's telling us that the standard for having eternal fellowship with God in heaven is perfection. Now this is a truly terrifying concept. The Bible contains many rules and regulations, especially in the Old Testament, but even if you only look at the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels you would be overwhelmed to try to follow all of them for only one day. I know. I've tried.

When I became a Christian my senior year of high school, I failed to understand the true meaning of the Gospel. The Gospel is that although we are imperfect and deserving of eternal punishment (physical and spiritual death) Jesus came to Earth and lived a perfect life. He paid for our imperfection through death on a cross, bearing our sin and replacing it with His perfect obedience. He was raised from the dead and now is our intercessor; as such He has allowed all people who trust in Him, although still imperfect, to have eternal life in God's presence. I tried desperately to live according to the precepts Jesus laid down in the New Testament instead of relying on His perfect grace and I kept falling short of perfection. I was fighting an addiction at the time, one which I am now more successfully fighting, praise God, and every time I fell back into it, I felt as if I had died. I felt like a hypocrite and a failure. On the outside I appeared, as I had my whole life, to be a "good person" but inside I was tearing myself apart. I had even told some close friends about my struggles, hoping to remove my sense of guilt, but this didn't help because when I messed up again I continued to pile more guilt upon myself. I got so depressed at my failings that by spring break of my freshman year here at Princeton I nearly committed suicide. I'll never forget standing on the eighth hole at Pebble Beach with my golf teammates and wanting desperately to jump off the 75 foot high cliff that bisected the fairway. I wanted to put an end to this "lie" I had been living. I proclaimed to be a changed man since accepting Christ as my Lord and Savior but I was still struggling with the same addiction I had had before becoming a Christian. I had read through the whole New Testament and I had read every verse talking about God's incredible love for us, even though we are messed up, but I couldn't grasp how His love could apply to *me*, someone who continued to sin even after accepting the Gospel as truth.

Perhaps unsurprisingly I didn't jump. I thank God for that every day. In the following weeks I reread the book of Romans and was amazed at what I read. I had never felt its truth as I did at that point. "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," "God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us," "I do not understand my own actions. For I do the very thing I hate... Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 3:22, 23; 5:1-11; 7:14-25; 8: 1, 38, 39). It was during this time that I realized I didn't have to be perfect. In fact admitting my imperfection was what God wanted the most.

I'm not the only Christian who has struggled to reveal my shortcomings, nor am I the only Christian who is messed up. We're all people. We all have skeletons in our closets; we all struggle with certain things, either in thought or in action. It breaks my heart when I see other Christians acting self-righteously and even more so when I realize that I'm acting that way. We have no right to judge others because in judging, we judge ourselves. When I'm honest with myself I realize just how messed up I am. Because I have been forgiven so much I have no reason to think less of anyone else for what they have done. Christ came to call sinners, and we *all* fall into that category, Christians and non-believers alike. True Christian community doesn't involve hiding sin or covering up the ugly stuff we've thought or done. It doesn't allow room for a "holier-than-thou" complex between other Christians or non-believers. True Christian community involves confession, love and forgiveness. We're a collection of messed up people relying on the perfection of Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be a Christian. My name is Eric Salazar, and I'm a Christian because I'm messed up.

Eric Salazar '11