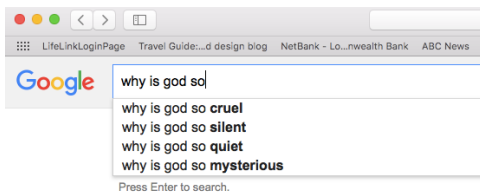


## The man from heaven busts some myths!

### John 3:16-21

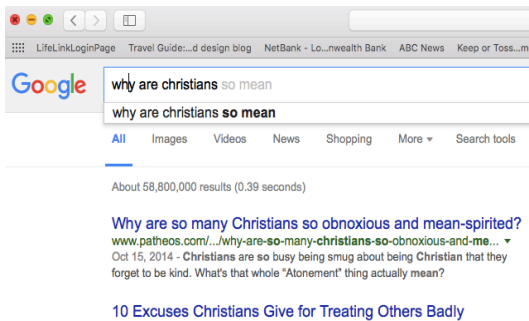
If you've become familiar with the internet over the last few years you may have noticed an interesting feature on Google. If you start typing a query into the search box you'll notice that Google tries to save you some time by suggesting what the rest of your query might be. It's a feature called *autocomplete* and it's the product of Google's practice of recording every single query that people type into their search engine. Their suggestions are based on the most popular searches that people conduct using the words that you have started to type in.

It's a fascinating feature because it really does expose what our society is thinking. You can do a lot of experiments with this feature, especially when it comes to matters of faith. Here's an example of one I conducted just this week...



"Why is God so..." and here are the suggestions: "cruel, silent, quiet, mysterious". These are the questions people are asking, and they reveal a lot about the assumptions they carry with them as they think about God. That God is somehow inaccessible, and that he's a big old meanie.

Some of the questions are pretty easily answered. He's not silent at all. In the past he's spoken through the prophets, but in these last days the writer to the Hebrews says, he has spoken through his son. God has spoken to us and his purposes are not mysterious. But is God mean? That's a question we'll come back to in a minute.



Here's another revelation of what people are thinking. We've heard what they think about God, but what do they think about his followers? When you type in the words *why are Christians so ...* the suggested question is one that *hurts*. "Why are Christians so mean?" Look at the first actual web page entry that we get. It's an article titled: *Why are so many Christians so obnoxious and*

*mean-spirited? Wow!*

It's quite confronting, isn't it, to come face to face with what people actually think in the privacy of their own homes as they surf the internet. People have opinions about us and the God we worship, and today I'd like to address three of them; three opinions that I think are myths—myths which are busted in today's passage from John's Gospel.

To begin with let's go to the first question that I shared with you from my Google experiment. People are asking *Why is God so mean?* Another person who shared this assumption was the late Christopher Hitchens. He was a well known atheist until his death from cancer in 2011. His question about the Christian God went like this: "What kind of designer or creator is so cruel and indifferent?" This is a question from his book *The Portable Atheist*.

Why might people think this? Well, possibly for a number of reasons. People might think that God is selfish! What kind of God demands everyone's obedience to their commands? What Kind of God demands that everyone worship him and him alone? He sounds like an egomaniac, doesn't he? Completely self-absorbed!

Or, other people might look at the suffering that we have in the world and conclude that God must be a cruel figure to inflict all this upon us. Or, at the very least, he must be indifferent to let it continue.

And yet others might look at God and be turned off by God's role as judge. Why is it any of his business what I do? Why right does he have to have the last say in what I've done with my life? And so God becomes mean because he seeks to call us to account.

How do these points of view correspond with the first two verses of our reading? Let's have another look at them: Ch 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Is God selfish? Look again at the first half of v 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. John's opinion isn't that God is mean, rather that God is loving, And that this is a self-giving love; God isn't a taker rather he's a giver.

And what is it that he gave? He gave his only son to die on a cross. When a loved one of ours celebrates a special occasion (like a birthday or anniversary) our love is shown by sacrificing some money and buying some gifts, Well, God's love is also shown by sacrificial gift giving; the giving of his son as a gift to us. Some people think that this itself is cruel, that by giving his son God is like an abusive Father. But Jesus himself says that he gives up his life on his own accord, that this is something that God the Father and God the fully-grown-adult-son have decided to do between them.

And the reason they decide to carry out this unselfish act is because they do indeed care about suffering in the world. Look again at the second half of verse 16: that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God knows that there is pain involved in the world. Jesus himself understood pain and grief. What happened when he was shown the tomb of his friend Lazarus? John tells us that Jesus wept. And so in the face of all this suffering, God decided to do something about it. He gave his son to provide *eternal life* for those who believe.

Eternal life is where there will be no more tears or pain and where death itself will be a distant memory. So is God cruel because of the presence of pain? Well, the full picture is that he's provided an eternal solution to pain.

Some people hear this and they say "OK that's all well and good, but why doesn't eternal life come sooner, why does he make us wait for it and suffer in the meantime?" Well, there are a couple of texts in the bible that may help with an answer. 2 Peter 3:9 says that God is being patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish but wanting everyone to come to repentance. And in 2 Cor 14:7 Paul speaks about his light and momentary troubles—which include for him being beaten almost to death, going hungry, almost drowning at sea—he says these are light and momentary troubles which are far outweighed by eternal glory. These verses teach us that whatever we experience now, they are nothing compared to what is waiting for us in the future. Eternal life is so wonderful that it's worth putting up with the pain of this world just that little bit longer so that more people have chance of experiencing it by coming to know Christ.

And while eternal life is wonderful, it's also true that the other place, the place of judgment, that will be so horrific that it's worth putting up with the nastiness of this world so that more people will have their chance of escaping it. God's slowness in ending the suffering of this world is a slowness born out of concern; he's stalling for our benefit. Pain and suffering are not necessarily proofs that God is mean. He is concerned about these things and he's provided a solution.

"But", someone else might say. "You speak about God's judgment. that in itself is proof that God is mean." Well, look at v17: For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. It is true that God will judge the world, but I'm glad that's the case because judgment means justice. It means God cares about all the unfair things that happen in the world, it means that cruel dictators and other evil people won't get away with it.

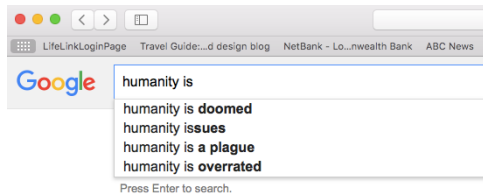
As humans beings we long for justice. Think how upset we get when criminals get let off because of a legal loophole, or when corruption means one DA gets through at council when another is knocked back. Justice is a good thing, and you can't have justice without a judge. But even then, when we find that we ourselves are on the wrong side of the law, it's very hard at that point to be big fans of the justice system, isn't it? Even though we might know that we've done wrong we'd love to have a little bit of mercy thrown our way.

Well, even though he is a judge, God would much rather show us mercy than justice. In fact, this is the whole point of Jesus mission: not to condemn us, but to bring about mercy. And so, as Jesus was raised up on that cross, His death provided the means by which we would receive mercy instead of condemnation. Is God mean because he is a judge? Not when he goes to such great lengths *to not condemn us*.

So in the end, how do we answer the charge that God is mean? We look at Jesus and his mission. The work of Jesus is not the work of a mean God, it's the work of a gift giving God who *is* concerned about pain and who loves to show mercy.

And there are other myths we can be fooled by. Another big one is that the human race is fundamentally good, that deep down inside, human beings are nice and kind creatures.

We heard this recently through a remarkable speech given by this man. I wonder whether you heard the recent 8 minute speech by Stan Grant, the Australian journalist who is also of indigenous heritage. It really is worth hearing because he outlines just how racist our nation is, especially when the experience of our indigenous Australians is considered. But he ends with a refrain of hope: "we are better than this, we are better than this." He's appealing to what he sees as a latent goodness that sits within everyone.



Trouble is, not many people actually agree with his last point. According to Google, what do we really think about humanity? When we type in the words "Humanity is..." how have people completed the sentence? "doomed, is a plague, is overrated" says Google. While Stan Grant's assumptions are very positive, most people are little more pessimistic about the character of humanity.

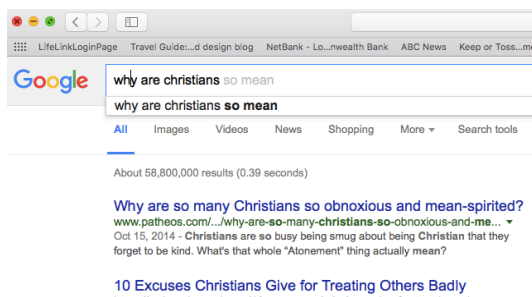
This is one area where Google and the Bible are on the same page. Have a look at vs 19-20 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. It's a verse that speaks of the reality of people doing evil things in this world, and that people would rather keep on doing them than have their evil deeds exposed for what they are. It's a verse that explains a lot of what we experience in life

A couple of months ago another journalist, Richard Glover, he wrote an article which asked why it is that Christians are so maligned. "When exactly" he asks "did Christians become such a derided and ridiculed minority in this country?" Well, perhaps John gives us some idea here. Part of our job as Christian people is to testify to the truths contained in the Bible, and people who love darkness and love what it is that darkness hides, they're going to react very strongly to something that's radiating light, because it makes them feel uncomfortable.

It's also the reason why in some cases—not in every case, but in some cases—people who have been regular at church suddenly drop out. If they've made a decision that goes against God's desire for their lives, then they don't want to hear the Bible being read! They don't want to hear the bible being taught faithfully! And so they start to withdraw from community. I've seen it happen. It would too much to

assume this is always the case, but it does happen; darkness becomes comfortable, and so people shy away from the light.

Google is spot on with this one, humanity is a mess. And so what can be done? Well, Christ again is the answer. You see even though human beings are a mess, In God's eyes we are still very valuable, so valuable that Jesus was sent to make us right. Yes the light that he offers is a light that exposes sin, but it also purifies us. I am told that the reason you should hang your washing out on the line is because the sunlight itself can help with the cleaning process. Anyway, this is how we should think about the light of Christ and his word. It diagnoses the problem, but it also has the remedy in that it points us back to Christ and his cross, a place where our sins are forgiven and where we can receive a fresh start.



And once we receive a fresh start we ought to ensure that we in no way assume that we are somehow superior to others. Here's the Google search that I showed you before: "Why are Christians so... mean"! "Why are they so obnoxious and mean spirited? Christians are so busy being smug about being Christian that they forget to be kind", says the first article.

It's true that as Christian people we are confident that we know the truth and that with the help of the Holy Spirit we can make great strides in living to please God. But that doesn't make us superior to others. If we do think that we're better than all those sinners out there then that indicates we've bought into a myth that simply isn't true. Have a look at verse 21. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. The meaning of this verse is a bit unclear in the NIV translations that we use here in church, but whenever we come across an unusual verse in one translation it's always a good idea to read it in a different translation to gain clarity. In the Holman Christian Standard Bible the verse reads like this: But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God. That's a little clearer! The person who knows the truth and lives by the truth can only do so because God is at work in them. We Christians are not superior beings, rather it's the superior God who is working in us who makes the difference.

You may have seen in the news that the recently appointed Australian of the Year David Morrison has been receiving a bit of flack. People have been saying he doesn't deserve the award, that the good work he did making the army a fairer place was in actual fact largely due to the work of others. And so he's been very quick to credit other people and to say "I wasn't expecting this, I wasn't deserving of this." We've seen a very humble David Morrison. And that's the model we ought to adopt when we think about the crown and title that we've received: the crown of eternal life, the title of co-heir with Christ. We haven't received them because we're special,

rather we've received them because of the work of others, the work of Jesus for us and the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

In fact, that's the answer to each of the myths we've looked at today. Each myth is answered by looking at the work of Jesus. **Is God mean?** What does the work of Jesus tell us? Not that he's mean but that he's loving. **Is humanity really Good?** What does the work of Jesus tell us? Not that we're good but that we're a much loved mess. **Are we X'ns a superior breed of people?** What does the work of Jesus tell us? That we are nothing without him. That's a useful thing to remember when you next hear a myth about the Christian faith. How does the work of Jesus challenge that myth?

I'll lead us in prayer.