

***Question: I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but now I'm trying to change. I tried going back to the church I attended as a child, but I don't feel accepted. What would Jesus do?***

Sometimes the very religion intended to administer help and spiritual healing to broken lives is misused in some very unloving ways. Some churches have failed to understand that genuine doctrinal purity is not necessarily demonstrated by affirmations of a creed but by everyday practical living in the likeness of the Lord of compassion and forgiving grace. These churches isolate themselves from the pain of people around them and often cast stones of judgment at those who have not come up to their standards. This approach to Christianity can create a sense of guilt and hopelessness to a person instead of the needed forgiveness and spiritual healing. Although one may have repented of past sinful ways, he may be scolded, censured and made to feel guiltier instead of being encouraged for seeking righteousness.

In contrast, Jesus came to minister and bring good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind and release for the oppressed (Luke 4:16-21). He ate with sinners and made outcasts feel comfortable in his presence. It was not uncommon for Jesus to break man-made religious rules in order to help people in need of healing. He took upon himself the pain of others and bore their burdens. He left heaven to bring holiness into a sinful world. Instead of isolating himself from sinners, he went out among people of all kinds, talked with them, loved them and died to save them. He came to demonstrate God's grace in ways that could draw sinners into a new and better way of life in the Kingdom of God instead of keeping them out. As someone once said, "The church is not a sanctuary for saints but a hospital for sinners."

In the Bible, the church is sometimes portrayed as "the body of Christ" (Ephesians 1:22-23). This analogy suggests that a church should view itself as Christ's continuing representative in this world. Thus, we should be able to identify God's people as we see them fulfilling the mission of Jesus among sinful and needy people. I believe Jesus would have us understand that no church is perfect and not all churches will react to someone in self-righteousness and unkindness. While we don't want people to condone any sin in a person's

life, we do need them to help those in need to get beyond the past and find new life through forgiveness.

Churches do exist that are eager to accept, love and help people whatever their past may be.

Above all, each of us should be assured that Jesus loves us even in our sins (Romans. 5:8). If we seek the Lord in prayer and don't give up, any of us can find a church that acts like Jesus. He will help us.

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