

Christianity or Moralism, Can You Tell the Difference?

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I imagine that most of you are familiar with the account in John 8 of the woman caught in the act of adultery and brought before Jesus by the Pharisees. They knew that Jesus had many times before cited the law and then said, "But I say unto you." This time, they figured they had an airtight case of adultery and if Jesus contradicted this, they thought they would be able to charge him with violating the law of Moses.

Speaking of the woman they had brought to Jesus, the Pharisees correctly stated that "Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned" and then asked Jesus, "but what sayest thou?" Jesus knew they were testing Him, so He said nothing. Then, in response to their persistence, He finally said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (verse 7). One by one, the woman's accusers left. Then, "When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (verses 10-11).

This is a beautiful account in which Jesus teaches us to remember our own sinfulness, not condemn others, and be forgiving. Unfortunately, many modern Christians, instead of following the example of Jesus in this story, more resemble the Pharisees. It seems that too many of us have gotten our heads screwed on backwards and no longer understand the difference between Christianity and moralism.

The message of Christianity is that Jesus died for sinners. God will forgive all those who believe on Jesus as their Savior. The Gospel is a personal message. The sinner is supposed to think of himself, of his sins, and of his need for a Savior. It is a Good News message of grace and forgiveness and freedom and joy!

The message of moralism is law and bondage and condemnation. When it is personal, it is a message of, "I must perform the works of the law to be accepted." But it is often directed at others: "You are a sinner! You must not do that, you must not think that, you must not be that. I don't want you around because of your sin. You ought to

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have your rights and privileges curtailed or removed, perhaps even your life, because of your sin. Unless you change, you are going to hell." This is not the Gospel, which means "Good News." It is bad news. It is the very antithesis of the message Christians are supposed to be bringing to this dark world.

This is not to say that Christians live immorally. The Christian wants to do right and please God out of thankfulness because God has graciously saved him from his wretched state of sin. For the Christian, grace, trust in Jesus, and forgiveness come first; thankful (but imperfect because of human weakness) submission follows. The Christian, remembering his own natural state, understands the frail and helpless state of other sinners. He knows that "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He pities sinners, and so he wants to tell them the Good News of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

The moralist, on the other hand, either starts out putting obedience first, or, in many cases, may be a Christian who loses sight of grace and replaces it with morality. He may even believe that he is initially saved by believing the Gospel, but that he must then work at the law to stay saved or to grow as a Christian. But this is still legalism, as our entire salvation and our growth as Christians is entirely by grace. All moralists, whether they are Christians who slip into it or people who start out as mere moralists, have trouble pitying sinners. Instead, the moralist points a finger and condemns.

Sadly, the moralist message is fast becoming the dominant message of western Christianity. In the United States, the stereotypical Christian is perceived as more likely to be pointing a condemning finger at homosexuals or accusing politicians of promoting socialism than preaching the Good News of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Yes, homosexuality is a sin, and no doubt some politicians are promoting a socialist agenda. But pointing these things out has nothing to do with the commission Jesus Christ has given to us: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel [the Good News] to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Luke gives an account of when Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem and approached a village of Samaritans. He sent some followers ahead to prepare a place for Him to stay, but the Samaritans refused to receive Him because He was going to Jerusalem (the Samaritans did not believe in worshipping in Jerusalem, but instead worshipped on Mount Samaria). We then read, "And when his disciples James and

John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did? But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village" (Luke 9:54-56).

I was once in a men's prayer meeting when one of the men said that we should all get bombs and go to a gay rights parade and blow up the queers. This man knew not what manner of spirit he was of. It was not the Holy Spirit that moved him to say such a thing. It was the spirit of moralism. The same spirit moves moralists to have a militant attitude and advocate war. But, as quoted above, Jesus said, "For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And we are supposed to be following Him.

Moralists are also unfeeling for the plight of others. Jesus preached the Gospel to the poor (Matthew 11:5); Paul said he was forward to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10). But rather than helping the poor, moralists are more likely to be found blaming the poor for being poor and telling them to be pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. The Epistle of James addresses this problem. Most English translations of James 2:15-16 lose the force of what he is saying with such awkward wording as, "Be ye warmed and filled." In fact, the Greek says, "Warm yourselves, feed yourselves." It is the very thing moralists say, instead of doing what Jesus would have them do by helping poor people (notice Luke 16:19-31).

To sum up the differences between moralism and Christianity:

| Moralism | Christianity |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Law centered | Gospel centered |
| Condemning | Forgiving |
| Often Old Testament oriented | Always New Testament oriented |
| Unfeeling | Feels for the plight of others |

Please don't misunderstand me as saying that we are not to discern between good and evil and right and wrong doctrine based on the Bible. Certainly, we are. Even this article discerns between moralism and Christianity and concludes that moralism is wrong.

Moralism is wrong because it is anti-Gospel, anti-grace, and legalist. It judges by the letter of the law, which the moralist blindly does not understand one cannot keep (Romans 3:20). By condemning others, the moralist is also condemning himself: "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15). But the Christian way taught by our Lord is beautiful:

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

Luke 6:35-38

And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

Romans 5:5-10