

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A GOOD *CHRISTIAN*?

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Christ came into the world to free men from their sins and from the power of evil. But He also freed them from a lot of legalistic nonsense to which they had been subjected by the “Traditions of Men”.

Take the Sabbath law, for instance. The law of God was simple: Abstain from work on the Sabbath and don’t force anybody else to do work. But the Scribes and Pharisees spent years arguing over the most trivial points, binding men with a burden of minute regulations. The great schools of the Rabbis argued over such important matters as whether an egg could be eaten that had been laid on the Sabbath. They perverted the idea of the Sabbath rest to forbid men to perform even an act of necessary charity for someone else. Christ had to remind them sharply: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Christ insisted on the spirit of the law that gives life, rather than the letter that kills. Yet some have apparently missed the whole point of Christ’s message. They look to the Bible merely as a series of cold rules. . . . to be rigorously applied in the sense that seems right to them. They insist that any attempt to soften their literalness is an evasion, “explaining away God’s law.”

Thus some men are firmly convinced that they have no immortal souls . . . God alone has immortality (I Tim. 6: 16) and not all the **words** in the world will convince them that while God is immortal in His own right, He has made man’s soul after His own image in this respect.

If we want to, we can make our whole lives a rigid set of meaningless rules . . . searching out various texts of Scripture and applying the **words** literally and senselessly. We can even go to the ultimate in nonsense and ban from our speech any reference to a man as “good.” We can not say, “Andrew Stevens is a good man,” for our Lord very plainly tells us that “No one is good but God alone.” (Luke 18:19).

In the Gospels Christ’s **words** many times come as a climax to a denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees. He condemns the abuse not the proper use of anything. You can’t please everybody. Sometimes you can’t please anybody. If we had to respect every interpretation that some people fancy they can put on the Scripture, it would be difficult to say how we might ever refer to anything and try to explain away anything.

Common sense is very necessary in our ordinary and particular everyday affairs. Without the use of common sense everything would soon be in a most sorry state of disorder. As a proof of this, we need only to consider the trouble we should bring upon ourselves if we were so foolish to overdo anything of any essence of which we ourselves are not capable of fully, completely and sincerely handling . . . such as spending our money without regard to our income.

There are many other matters in which the average man uses common sense. None of us, for instance, really like paying income tax. Nevertheless, we do eventually pay these dues. Our common sense tells us that it would merely bring trouble to ourselves and our families if we tried to evade paying them. So we dip our hands into our pockets, however reluctantly, because we know that it is common sense to do so.

If we have to earn our living, it is the same with our work and our dealings with our employer. In all probability we find much that is irksome in our work. Often we would much rather be spending our time in the garden, or taking slices out of the turf on the nearest golf links. But don't "kick over the traces" when we feel like this. We know very well that it would not be common sense to do so.

We know that we can't afford to neglect our worldly duties and so we don't shirk our job or disregard our employer's instructions. We know our livelihood, and the comfort and well-being of our family, depend to a very large extent on the way we perform our duty to our employer. We know that he has just claims on our time and energy in return for the wages we receive every week.

It is common sense, therefore, to weigh the possible consequences of any action our mind proposes to us before that action is taken, and from the few examples given, we know that common sense is a very valuable asset in our daily lives and that we make continual use of it. The fact is that we realize that our material well-being is so closely lined with our duty that we can't enjoy the one without doing the other—and we act accordingly.

We have seen that we do use common sense with regard to material things—the affairs of the body—and if we are wise, we shall also use common sense with regard to the things concerning that part of us which never dies—the soul.

We give the State and our employer their just dues for two reasons—from a sense of duty, because we know that they have just claims on us—and because we realize our dependence upon them. But if we stop to consider the matter we shall realize that our Creator has even greater claims upon us and that we are much more dependent upon God than we are upon our employers or the State. It is obviously common sense, therefore, to give God His just dues also.

To God we owe everything that we have—even life itself—and but for His supporting hand we could not exist for one second. Everything owes its existence to God, and but for Him we could neither live nor have anything.

God chose us out before the foundation of the world to be His children. He chose us because He loves us and He created the world and everything that is in it for our use and pleasure. He has given us all these things so that, through them, we might know Him, love Him with all our hearts and serve Him as His children in this world, and so be happy with Him forever in the world to come.

God's love for us is like the love of a mother for her children. It asks nothing in return but love—and willing obedience as a sign of that love. It is for this reason that He has given us our free will. He doesn't want us to be like alarm clocks which give us their service because they must. He wants us to serve Him because we love him, and that is why He never presses His claims upon us.

God owns us entirely and He has a much greater claim to our service than any employer can possibly have. Yet He does not insist upon His right or treat us as His servants. God treats us always as His children and He never forces our love and obedience. He is always ready to listen to us and sympathize with us, and He never expects **MORE FROM US THAN WE CAN DO. He does not even demand results. He is satisfied as long as He sees that we are **REALLY TRYING TO PLEASE HIM IN ALL SINCERITY**.**

Where will we find an employer who will treat us with such great indulgence as this and never expect from us more than we can give? And yet many, whose common sense tells them that they should give their employer an unstinted and loyal service, refuse that service to God Who is so much more indulgent to them, Who has given them such wonderful gifts, and Who loves them as His children! This is as unjust as it is foolish.

God is our greatest benefactor, and to refuse the love and service He wants from us is to show the greatest ingratitude and a complete lack of common sense. If it is foolish and unjust to neglect our duty to our employer, how much more foolish and unjust it is to neglect our duty to God! But for God we should not have anything at all—not even life.

The Church has always taught that no man is condemned.. . EXCEPT THROUGH HIS OWN FAULT. . . . that no one is held responsible by God for a duty that he can not fulfill because of inability to do so or of ignorance which is no fault of his own. As long as you sincerely love God and follow your conscience, and live and die with the grace of Christ in your heart, you will save your soul, regardless.

It is conscience as well as common sense which must be our supreme guide in all things: so that when conscience becomes unsettled, when our convictions are disturbed, when we are in doubt about how to act or what to believe—then and only

then are we bound before God to search again for that former peace of mind, to restore that spiritual tranquility we once enjoyed or are unable to enjoy. We must settle our conscience, regain clear convictions, resolve all doubts, and clear up all questions of belief, so that we may ride once more through life with common sense and right reason at the wheel. Thus, every one, then who is true to himself can find salvation through the Church. And, in view of that, we must pray and seek, ask and attempt to be “GOOD NEIGHBORS” not only in heaven . . . but here on earth . . . first.

Tolerance becomes for all mankind the noblest of virtues. No human being can with certainty say what is truth. And as the extreme example of tolerance, we are reminded of Voltaire’s epigram... “I will fight your opinions with my life, but I will fight to the death for your right to hold them.”

Of all the lovely words coined as currency for the English language and later debased and abused until its meaning has become bankrupt, the most tragic of all is tolerance.

When we begin to really analyze tolerance, we begin to wonder. . . is it anything other than a sign of mental confusion and personal cowardice? Is it something we ought to cultivate or . . . root out of our minds?

The virtue which we should all love and practice from our hearts is a deep tolerance for all the sons and daughters of God. But unrestricted tolerance is quite another thing. When there is a question of truth versus error, we cannot even pretend to be tolerant. In the heart of each of us there must be an abounding gentleness and love for our fellow man. We can never for a moment allow ourselves to be tempted by the easy way of force towards anything. Christ is not complimented nor is He pleased when we follow our own religious ideas instead of those taught by His Church in regards to where the bounds of our love must begin and end for the neighbor must be loved as we love ourselves.

But tolerance of untruth is not expected or possible. We cannot be asked to believe that two and two make seven. We cannot be asked to admit the possibility of man’s being either an animal, or a soul without a body, or an accident in a purposeless universe. We cannot be tolerant when people say that Christ was so poor an organizer that the one Church He thought He was building turned out to be a discordant babel of a thousand churches. We cannot be acquiescent when Mohammed and Confucius and Buddha and the Saviour of the world are lumped together in one antique shop of religious dust and cobwebs.

Truth is truth. One cannot be tolerant of error. Right is right. One cannot hear willingly the clamors and claims of evil. Christ and His truths of the Church, the Ecumenical Councils, Tradition, and the Holy Scriptures are the Light of the world. One cannot be asked to walk in darkness...where he knows by conviction and common sense what is better and what is best.

We can be gentle and kind and loving and merciful to all, but we cannot, where God's truths and man's rights and dignities are concerned, be asked to be intolerant. Such tolerance is treason to both God and Man. We can have not part of it.

To believe in God is as natural as to think. The Sacred Scriptures tell us that only the fool says, "There is no God." And Voltaire once remarked truly that if there were no God, the human heart would have to invent one.

The important question is not, "Do you believe in God?" Instinctively we do. But "How sincerely do we believe in God?" "How does believing affect living?" There are the challenging questions of our time! And their answer contains the key to earth's happiness and heaven's. Some men say "I believe in God" as casually as they might say, "How do you do," or "Lovely weather we're having." They mean most certainly that they believe in God, but they imply just as certainly that they intend to do precious little about it.

Faith like beauty, though real, is sometimes only skin deep. And so that which should make all the difference in the world becomes inconsequential. Because their belief in God is static, or at best just smoldering, these men miss the joys, the flaming greatness, the adventure which God intends them to have in the earnest practice of true religion. And true religion is never dismal or shabby; rather, it is of all things the most lightsome, dignified, and climactic.

There are some people in the world who would, if they had the power, hang the heavens with crepe: throw a shroud over the beautiful and life-giving bosom of the planet; pick the bright stars out of the sky; veil the sun with clouds; pluck the silver moon from her place in the heavens; close all gardens and fields and trample upon all the flowers with which they are bedecked and doom the world to an atmosphere of gloom. Such persons entirely miss the spirit of being a good Orthodox Christian.

Some people have the facility for touching the wrong key; from the finest instrument they extract only discord. They sound the note of pessimism everywhere. All their songs are in the minor key. They look down instead of up; their shadow predominates their lives. There is nothing bright, cheerful about them. Their outlook is always gloomy; times are always bad for them. Everything in their lives seems to be contracting and nothing growing or expanding in their lives.

With others it is just the reverse. They cast no shadows. They radiate sunshine. Every bud they touch opens its petals and flings out its fragrance and beauty. They never approach you but to cheer; they never speak to you but to inspire. They see the best in people and say pleasant and helpful things about them.

The world is very much like a looking glass; laugh at it, and it laughs back; frown at it, and it will also frown. We ourselves hold the key to life's happiness as good

Christians. This happiness is within our reach, within our souls, and it rests with us either to ignore or to enjoy it.

Saint Augustine said, “If any man wishes for happiness, let him raise himself above the things perishable, let him seek that which will always last, and which reverses of fortune will never take from him, God alone possesses this character, and consequently, in God alone is true happiness to be found.”

God is supreme Good. There is a tendency to seek that which seems good to us—glory, fortune, pleasure, power, these are the goals of our dreams, and poor humanity is given over to the unending chase after happiness, and after being a good Christian, but what a deceitful mirage it is!

You seek after the good, but where can it be found if not in God, the Sovereign Good, the Ultimate End of all things? You say that you want glory, but what glory can compare with that which heaven offers to you? You want treasures, but what riches are equal to grace? You want love, but who offers you a tenderness like that of God’s love? You wish to survive in the hearts and memory of mankind, but what immortality is not vain beside the immortality of paradise? Gather up all the glory and honors amid joys of the world, and tell me if the combined happiness of earth can counterbalance the joy and happiness we can ever hope to find in God!