

Christianity and Being A Good Person

Macy's Systems and Technology Council on Diversity and Inclusion

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Christianity, like the other faith systems we've heard about today, does in fact empower a person to become a better human being, but the source of that empowerment does seem to be a bit different. I think "empowerment" consists of two things, providing the motivation for someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do giving, and giving them the ability to do something they couldn't otherwise do.

With Christianity, the motivation comes from gratitude and hope. We are grateful because God has done great good for us, and the best way to show it is to do likewise for others. And we are hopeful that in doing good to others we might point them to the one who initiated this great good.

The ability to be good is where things get a little bit mystical. I don't totally know how to explain this, but the Bible says that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, He somehow comes to live inside of us. And that the Holy Spirit of God lives within us and helps direct us. When Christians "walk by the Spirit"—in other words, when we follow the direction of the Spirit of God that lives in us—it shows up in how we act. The apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, puts it this way: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Some of this outgrowth benefits us personally, but most of these characteristics manifest themselves in "being good."

Where things start to get interesting is when we look at how Jesus Christ, the central figure in Christianity, looks at the idea of being good. Because it's really not what you would expect. On the one hand, He spent much of his ministry doing good works and teaching about what to do and not do. He's not unclear about what we are to do. When He was asked what the greatest commandment was, He replied that the first was to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and that the second was to love your neighbor as yourself. He essentially boils the entirety of Old Testament teaching down to this: Love God, and Love people.

His most famous sermon is probably the Sermon on the Mount, in which He repeatedly takes some commonly-held notions on what it means to be good and then raises the bar significantly—both in terms of what it looks like to do good, and to whom we're supposed to do good. You see, from Jesus's perspective, doing good is not about doing nice things for people who like us—or who are like us. It's not about treating others how they deserve to be treated. I am supposed to to treat others and love others the way I have been treated and loved by a God who sacrificed His own son to pay for my screw-ups and my rebellion. This is where "being good" becomes so difficult. From God's perspective, there's a complete

disconnect between how a person deserves to be treated and how God wants them to be treated. Truly “being good” is also completely separated from how it benefits the person who’s doing it. Think about how this shows up at work.

- Am I still going to go the extra mile for a manager who has a history of taking credit for my hard work?
- Am I going to be fair in my review of a subordinate who does good work, but whom I really just don’t like?

You can begin to see why motivation that’s outside ourselves—and even a supernatural source of ability to do good—becomes pretty important. Now, occasionally we’ll do something for the benefit of someone else, even though they haven’t earned it and there’s no payoff for us personally. But according to Jesus, once a month isn’t going to cut it. According to Jesus, the standard is perfection. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus comes right out and says it, “Be perfect, therefore, as your father in heaven is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48) To take it a step further, Jesus kind of challenged the whole idea of being a good person. When someone approached Him and called Him “Good Teacher,” Jesus responded in a pretty surprising way. He asks, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.”

It’s an impossible standard for us to live up to, which could be pretty demotivating.

But there’s the good news, and it’s news that changes everything we know about “being good.” You see, when it comes to Christianity, **the most important thing about being good, is that being good is *not* the most important thing.**

Let me say that again: the most important thing about being good is that being good is *not* the most important thing. Does God want us to be good—particularly as it relates to how we love him and love other people? Absolutely. And because of that He gives us both the motivation and ability to be good, regardless of whether other deserve our goodness or whether we benefit from that goodness. But He does not make our being good people a condition for relationship with him.

For many of us—perhaps for most of us—the big question when it comes to being good is, am I good enough? What’s the standard? How do I know that I’m good enough to be in good with God? And what God says is, it’s not about *your* goodness, it’s about *Mine*. Christmas is a celebration remembering God’s goodness—the gift of his Son to the world so that we would never again need to wonder, am I good enough?