

While attending a creative writing class in a community college, my class was asked to write a poem. I wrote one called, "The Race," alluding to life as a race and concluding the poem with the words, "I know it's hard but hold on. Even if you suffer loss, just keep your eye fixed forward, set upon that lonely cross." Upon peer review, one classmate said, "If you would just leave the reference to the cross out, the poem would have a more universal appeal." In spite of the suggestion, I left the reference in because I felt that the cross was the heart of the poem, just as the cross is the heart of true religion.

In essence, the ultimate goal of every religion is to become a good person. It's not really about the reward. It's about attaining some level of goodness. Most religions strive to reach this goal through their efforts. In many religions, God has been offended by sin. As a result, each is on a quest to calm the anger and regain the favor of their gods, but Christianity is different. While some say all religions are the same, Christianity is really the opposite of other religions.

While other religions seek to calm the anger of its gods by being good, the Christian God (while offended by sin) still loves the sinner (Rom. 5:8). In most religions, people try to calm the anger and fix the relationship of their offended god, but the God of Christianity loves us in spite of our sins, so He makes the first move to fix the relationship. In other religions, men chase God, but the God of Christianity comes to us. Other religions try to appease their gods through sacrifice, but the Christian God is sacrificed for us. Other religions base their hope of reward on being good enough, but the reward of Christianity is based on God giving us His righteousness.

The central issue of every religion is the heart. Most religions believe that we are basically good at heart. They believe people are naturally good, and if we follow the heart, it will ultimately lead us to a good life. They feel that the purpose of this life is to follow the inclinations of the heart, which will eventually lead them to a good life, and gain them some reward in the end. While most have adopted the idea that the heart is

naturally good, Christianity is honest enough to tell us the truth, that the heart is naturally sinful.

Christianity tells us what most of us already know but are afraid to admit. Most admit that they are far from perfect and have done many bad things, but few will admit that this is the result of a sinful heart. Fortunately, the Bible is honest enough to tell the truth. It says, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it" (Jer. 17:9)? The Bible says the heart is not good but full of selfish desires that lead us into sin, and yet most people don't even know the heart is bad. "Who can know it?"

This foundational belief of good heart versus bad heart determines how a person lives. If a person thinks they have a good heart, but occasionally goes a little off the path, they will follow the inclinations of their heart, trusting where the heart leads, while trying to put a leash on it to control it. This reminds me of the guy who was waking his pet lion on a leash when it suddenly broke free and devoured a three year old child. So many people think they have their passions under control when they are suddenly pushed over the edge and lash out. All of us have a limit which pushes us over the edge, and unless we have Christ holding the leash of our hearts, we will be in trouble when the crisis comes. We cannot control the heart.

Some religions work tirelessly to try and tame the human heart. Catholics do acts of penance or live in monasteries. Muslims do ritual prayers and fasting. Jews have lists of laws. Buddhists, Hindus, and even atheists have rituals they use to try and tame the heart, but Christians recognize the impossibility of this. According to the Bible, "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Even our best effort is not enough to make us good. Prayer rituals, fasting, sacrifices, penance are all useless in this area, and yet tragically, many spend their entire lives in these different religions striving to tame the human heart only to find out in the end that their efforts were futile.

There was an old song by Neil Young in which he sings about his long journey through life, trying to find a 'heart of gold.' He sings how he has gone all over the world in his search for a heart of gold, and now he is getting old, and he still hasn't found it. This song fittingly represents the plight of many who strive all their lives to obtain some level of peace with their gods through good works, sacrifices, and other rituals only to find that their efforts were futile. As the Jews sought to gain God's favor by their sacrifices, God finally cried out, "I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats," concluding, "Bring no more futile sacrifices" (Isa. 1:11, 13). David understood this. He said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" (Ps. 51:16, 17).

While all other religions seek to obtain the favor of their god by works, Christianity recognizes the impossibility of gaining God's favor by our actions. Jeremiah said it best when he asked, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23)? The point is, we cannot be good with a bad heart, so God appeals, "get yourselves a new heart" (Eze. 18:31). While other religions try to fix the old heart, God says efforts to obtain holiness with the old heart are useless. That would be like trying to get strong enough to jump over the Grand Canyon. Impossible! We need a new heart, but we can't get it by fasting, penance, sacrifice, or works. The only way to get it is by asking Jesus into our hearts. When we do this, God will "take out the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh" (Eze. 11:19).

My cousin was born with a bad heart and eventually had to get a heart transplant. Similarly, we too need a spiritual heart transplant because all the rules, rituals, fasting, pilgrimages, and ceremonies are not enough to make us holy. The only way to be holy is by receiving a new heart, but not just any heart will work. It will do no good to get another bad heart. We need a holy heart. God knew the only way we could obtain holiness was to get the heart of God, so Jesus

offered to take our bad heart and give us His good heart. This is the greatest trade ever.

Since our hearts cannot be tamed, the only way to fix the problem is to crucify the human heart and give us a good heart in its place. This is the exchange that took place on the cross (Gal. 2:20). When Jesus died, He took our sinful heart or mind and crucified it, offering us His heart or mind. That's why the Bible says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). While some claim Jesus was just a man, this exchange could never work with a man. Jesus affirmed that He was the great "I Am," claiming to be "God" (John 8:58; 10:33). Because Jesus is God, He was able to take our death and give us His mind, that we may be "partakers of the divine nature," taking part of God's nature (1 Pet. 1:4).

You see, Christianity offers something no other religion offers. It offers a cross in which Jesus initiates the relationship by taking our sinful heart, crucifying it on the cross, then by putting the heart of God inside us because we have a bad heart. No matter how hard you try, your efforts and rituals will not save you. God does not want your futile efforts. He requires holiness. Since you cannot do this yourself, Jesus promised to do it for you. The only way to get this is by laying aside your pride, the prejudices of your religion, and accepting Jesus as the Messiah, asking Him to come inside your heart and make you holy. Jesus said, "I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). By inviting Jesus into your heart and letting Him change you, you can have peace. His word to you is, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Won't you stop resisting God, stop trying to make yourself holy, and accept Christ today?

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