

ALMOST CHRISTIAN
Job 38: 1-7 & Mark 10: 35-45
Dean Feldmeyer 10.20.24

“An almost Christian is one that is fond of the form, but never experiences the power of godliness in his heart.”

George Whitfield (1739)

“The Church is full of almost Christians...”

John Wesley (1741)

“Will you do me a favor?”

Have you ever had someone ask you that question? What was your response?

Well, tell me what the favor is and then I’ll tell you if I can do it, right?

My daughter, Sarah, when she was little, used to climb up on my lap and say, “Daddy, if I ask you a question will you say yes? Please?”

And I wanted to. I swear; I really wanted to. I would look into those beautiful blue eyes and that sweet face and my heart would just melt and I would say, “No, honey.”

I mean, no sane person says yes to a question like that no matter how much you love the person who is asking it. And, yet, here we find James and John, grown men, making that very request of Jesus.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

As it turns out, that request is still being made of Jesus by people who think of themselves as mature Christians. For many alleged people-of-faith, God has become little more than a cosmic butler, a Jeeves upon whom we call when we have a problem to be solved. But, beyond that, we’d just as soon he left us alone.

If this morning’s sermon comes off as more of a lecture than a sermon, I hope you will forgive me. I recently finished reading some things or, in a couple of cases, re-reading some things that I just have to share with you. But first, let me lay out some context. In the past two decades there have been several important, even groundbreaking studies done on the topic of religion in America in the 21st century.

Those studies yielded much knowledge and wisdom but there are five insights that were absolutely groundbreaking. First, I want to share those five insights. Then I will share some of the worrisome and troubling implications of those insights. Finally, I will talk about how we can provide an alternative ending to the story if we are willing to do the work that is required.

FIVE IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES

The studies discovered lots of important information, but five pieces were shockingly important to the point that several books have been written dealing with each of them:

1. Most young Americans under the age of 35 have a positive view of religion but otherwise don't give it much thought.

Teenagers are not hostile toward religion. The vast majority view it in a positive light. But neither do they care about it very much. It doesn't figure very largely on their mental map. They don't give religion or religious faith much consideration one way or the other when making decisions about their everyday lives.

2. Most young Americans mirror their parents' religious faith.

When asked about the source of their religious attitudes, they almost universally point to their parents. The old adage still applies for Mom and Dad: When it comes to your kids' attitudes about God, faith, morality and ethics, you pretty much get what you are.

3. Today's young people lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience of the world.

The vast majority of teenagers are *incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. Asked to describe God and the number one answer by a huge majority is, "nice."

4. A minority of American teenagers and young adults – but a significant minority – say religious faith is important, and that it makes a difference in their lives.

These teenagers are doing better in life on a number of scales, compared to their less religious peers. These teens tend to be Mormons, African American evangelical Christians, and white evangelical Christians.

5. When asked about their theology and religious outlook, young people tend to describe a religion that would be considered heretical to even the most liberal understanding of Christianity –

Popular, cultural Christianity is a sort of Mulligan stew of Christianity, Buddhism, Native American Indian spirituality, occult superstition, and New Age mumbo-jumbo. When their spirituality is boiled down to its essence it reveals a new, distinctive religion called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM

These are the basic tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- 1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth *from a distance*.**
- 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.** God doesn't like rudeness or anything that makes people uncomfortable. God is an affirmer and a supporter, not a critic. There really isn't all that much difference in religions since this is what they all desire, so it doesn't really matter what religion you practice as long as you are a nice person.
- 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.** To the degree that my religion helps me achieve that goal, it works. Religions that don't work like that can

and should be discarded. The purpose of my religion is to serve my needs, to make my life better, to make me feel better about the world and myself.

4. **God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.** Young people tend to describe God as “kinda like my guidance counselor” or “like my grandfather who knows how to fix things.” God is a cosmic butler who shows up when we ring the prayer bell to help us solve our problems and then disappears back into the cosmos until we call for him again.
5. **Good people go to heaven when they die.** Admission to heaven is something you earn by being good, that is, nice, polite, helpful, friendly, and tolerant.

When we first hear these tenets of MTD they don't sound all that bad. It's only upon close inspection that we come to realize that this is simply not scriptural Christianity.

The God of Christianity did not create the universe and then step aside waiting to be called upon when we need him. The God of scripture is radically involved in his creation. The God of Abraham and Moses and David and Jesus and Paul interacts with his people and seeks to be in intimate relationships with them.

God wants people to be nice, yes. But nice is not the be all and end all of Christianity. In fact, the word “nice” never appears in the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. In the scriptures God calls his people to be just! God calls his people to be loving. God calls his people to be righteous and accountable and courageous.

The difference in being nice and being Christian is the difference in washing your hands and taking a bath. They are both good but the one does not substitute for the other. Note that the word “love” does not appear in MTD, at all.

The central lesson of the New Testament is that the Christian life is not about me. It's not about my happiness and it doesn't care a fig about how I feel about myself, about my self-esteem or my self-image. Christianity calls us to live not for ourselves but for each other. “The one who would be master of all must be slave of all.” Jesus said that. “The first will be last and the last first.” Remember that?

Nowhere do we find Jesus saying, “Love yourself.” That's a modern, American construct. What Jesus says is “love... *who?*...one another.”

And eternal life is not solely about where you go after you die. Heaven is not a reward for nice behavior and correct theology. The Kingdom of God which Jesus speaks of begins here. It is about the depth, the quality, the richness, the authenticity of the life we live. That rich, deep, authentic life begins here and extends beyond the grave not as payment for services rendered but as a gift of God.

That we are fair and decent and kind and gentle and loving to each other is our way of saying thank you to our Creator who loves us even when we do not deserve to be loved.

So how did our kids and grandkids come to hold such a sloppy, watered down, lifeless form of faith? How did they come to trade in the nutritious meat of Christianity for this lukewarm broth of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Well, brothers and sisters, you are not going to like the answer.

We taught it to them.

We, their parents and their grandparents and their churches, taught them that their religious faith isn't really all that important. We taught them that it isn't really all that significant what you believe, as long as you're a nice person. We taught them that God watches us "from a distance" and doesn't make demands on our lives and just occasionally shows up to fix things.

We taught them that their own self-esteem and their own happiness are the only important things in life. And we taught them that if they are nice and avoid the major sins God will reward them by letting them go to heaven when they die.

Oh, we knew better. We knew that Christianity calls us to live our lives sacrificially for others. We knew that Christianity calls us to be radically committed to God and God's purpose. We knew that being a Christian, a real, serious, committed Christian is hard work and can cause a person's life to be hard. We knew that Christian values can make you unpopular and can set you apart from your peers and can even cost you your life. And we loved our kids so much that we didn't want to see them go through all that.

So, we taught them that biblical Christianity just isn't all that important. We taught them that being nice is enough. And now we don't understand why they have turned away from the church in record numbers and aren't coming back.

WHAT CHRISTIANITY HAS TO OFFER: AN ALTERNATIVE TO MTD

Fortunately, we can undo the damage. There is still time. It will be neither simple nor easy, but it is possible. It is possible because God has made it so that if we turn back, away from this thin, watery broth of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and back to Scriptural Christianity, we can save our children, our grandchildren, our communities, our church, and quite possibly, the world.

Before I get into the heart of the subject, however, let me make one thing very clear:

Scriptural Christianity is not fundamentalist Christianity. Time after time the studies show that Mormon and Evangelical Christian teens were more articulate about their faith and apply their faith to their lives more thoroughly not because of the content of the faith they were taught, but because of the methods and the system that was used in teaching them.

And that is a key word, here: *TEACHING*.

We have believed for too many years that all we had to do was expose our kids to Christianity and they would somehow absorb it. Where did we get such a fatuous notion?

We teach our children baseball. We teach our children mathematics. We teach our children history and English and science and table manners. But do we expose them to Christianity?

Brothers and sisters, there is no substitute for teaching.

And the second thing that the studies show us is that, when it comes to teaching Christianity, ministers, youth ministers, and Sunday school teachers come way down on the list. The most important and effective teachers of the Christian faith are parents and (wait for it) grandparents.

It is what children and teenagers see and hear at home that determines their faith stance. It is those kids that come from homes where religious faith is discussed openly and often who fair best not just in the spiritual part of their lives but in every other part as well.

Parents and grandparents, if you don't feel qualified to teach your kids Christianity 101, you better start getting qualified because it's you that they are looking to for instruction. Oh, and one other thing: This goes for our surrogate parents and grandparents as well, the people who mother us and father us and grandparent us as we are growing up – people in our churches, our neighborhoods, our schools, and so forth.

So, that's the "who" and the "how" of the teaching. Now we come to the "what."

CHRISTIANITY 101: THE THINGS WE TEACH

Teenagers who have been taught classical, scriptural Christianity have four things that those who espouse homemade MTD do not have. And they have it because they have been taught it:

1. A creed to believe – they confess their faith tradition's creed or God-story

Teens who have been taught classical, scriptural Christianity are familiar with and conversant in both the mythology, that is, the stories of their faith and the propositional theology, the creeds and beliefs of their faith. They know what they believe and why and it makes sense to them, and they can talk about it. These are things that are learned from teaching. Kids don't just pick this stuff up because they were exposed to it any more than they pick up chemistry because they were exposed to chemicals. These things are taught and re-taught. They are learned in Sunday school or church and then discussed at the dinner table or in the car on the way to the grocery or at grandma's house.

2. A community to belong to – they belong to a community that enacts the God-story.

They come together regularly with a community of faith into which they have been confirmed and of whom they feel a part. They come to worship and to fellowship as well as to serve and to learn. The community is most effective when it is multigenerational, warm, and nurturing, when it sets clear limits and has clear expectations. It works best when it encourages personal, spiritual and religious development through teaching, discussion, and personal sharing.

3. A call to live out – they feel called by this story to contribute to a larger purpose

They are taught that our choices have significance, meaning, and consequences beyond ourselves. They know that we have a calling to look out for the wellbeing of others. We are morally bound to contribute to God's purpose in the world and what God wants for the world is more important than what I want for me.

4. A hope to hold onto – they have hope for the future promised by this story.

God has a plan for the world and we, through our participation in the faith community, are participating in and contributing to the fulfillment of that plan.

AND NOW, THE TRICKY PART

A creed to believe. A community to belong to. A call to live out. A hope to hold onto.

Brothers and sisters, what a rich, full faith and life we have to offer our children and grandchildren. But before we can offer it, we must own it for ourselves.

The challenge which comes out of all the studies and surveys that have come out of the past 20 years is not a challenge to our kids and grandkids but a challenge to us and to the church. It is a challenge to be the Christians we want our children and grandchildren to become.

It is a challenge to learn what we must teach and then to teach it with both urgency and love.

It is the challenge to move from "Lord, will you do me a favor?" to "Here am I, Lord. Send me."

May God bless us all and may God include and continue to use us in his holy purpose.

AMEN