

Don't Worry; Be Happy

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Why is it that so often, two different things can look so much alike? The chanterelle mushroom is quite edible but it has a cousin called the jack-o-lantern mushroom which looks similar, smells similar and even tastes good, though it is poisonous. So many quality products are recreated as cheap knock-offs that the website eHow has a whole section devoted to recognizing the fakes. One recent computer hoax looks like a program trying to remove a virus from your computer, when instead it actually downloads one.

Even if all you're doing is trying to distinguish between a real smile and a fake one, we all get a lot of practice with this. We're always trying to figure out who or what is genuine. But this also means that other people are also trying to figure out if you are genuine. If you say you're a Christian, does your life reflect that? It seems like Christians are frequently charged with being hypocrites. But maybe the people accusing us have a valid point.

Barna Research, a group that looks at church and religious stuff, discovered that when it comes to daily living, there is almost no difference between Christians and non-Christians. They evaluated 15 moral behaviors – things like gambling, gossiping, and drunkenness. In most of those areas, Christians were statistically indistinguishable from non-Christians. In other words, for most people, their Christian beliefs do not have an impact on their daily behaviors.

What's going on here? There is a growing, unconscious movement in American churches to try to make Christianity easier. This is something that no one tried to make happen, yet it has happened. This is what it means for many Americans to be Christians today. It means going to church on Sunday, on average once every six weeks. It means believing that God exists, but that he is relatively uninvolved with human affairs. It means having spiritual beliefs, but not being passionate about them.

Smarter people than I have done much research into this phenomenon, and it turns out that this is not an isolated experience. These researchers have gone so far to say that many people who claim to be Christians actually follow a religion called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Let me break that down. Moralistic – it has a component of ethics, and distinguishing between good and bad. It does more than encourage you to be good; it makes that the central purpose of life. Therapeutic – in many ways, this religion is meant to make its followers feel better. It's not about God; it's about you. Deism – remember the old 'clockmaker' model of God? The one that said God created the world, but then stepped back to just see what happened? That's kind of how this functions. God is there but is not involved, unless you want something.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism was first discovered among young people. The National Survey of Youth and Religion uncovered good news and bad news. The good news is that most young people are not hostile toward religion, as they are sometimes portrayed. In general, teenagers have no negative feelings about church. The bad news, however, is that they have no good feelings either. They displayed a "benign-whateverism," shrugging their shoulders and indicating that religion just isn't important enough to care about much.

Religion is an extracurricular activity, like sports or music. It's a nice thing for a well rounded person to have on their college application. It's a nice thing to do on the weekends or on

Wednesdays, especially when you get to do service projects now and then. It's a nice way to spend time with family and friends. The music is nice, the people are nice, the youth are encouraged to be nice and kind and do the right thing. Religion is nice, but it's not meaningful. It's not relevant. It's not challenging in any way. For the majority of American youth, faith is a "whatever." An afterthought, not the solid core of their lives.

Further research, however, indicated that teenagers did not invent this religion on their own. They did not set out, intentionally or accidentally, to create a civic or pluralistic religion. Instead, they learned exactly what their churches taught them. Because it turns out that many adults also can no longer distinguish true Christianity from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

If we're going to commit our lives to Christ, and intentionally teach that faith, we need to learn to recognize how Christianity differs from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. There are five basic beliefs around which MTD centers.

- 1) A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- 3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- 4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- 5) Good people go to heaven when they die.

Did you notice the emphasis on being and feeling good? Three of the five tenets are just about being nice. But the Bible expects more from us than being good and nice. Just take a look at our Scripture reading this morning.

MTD asks us to be fair. Christianity calls us to go beyond fairness, to bless those who persecute us. Being nice often means being polite and civil. While those are good things, Jesus calls us to go deeper, with compassion, justice, forgiveness, and hospitality. MTD tells us we should be happy and feel good about ourselves. Christianity invites us to give up our own

happiness so we can weep with those who weep. Christianity invites us to be patient in our suffering. MTD tells us God is not particularly involved in our lives, unless we need something. Christianity invites us to deep involvement with God: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” MTD says that good people go to heaven when they die. Jesus himself, in Mark and Luke, says, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the faith of being nice, feeling good, and a God who doesn't interfere with our lives. Christianity calls us to something much deeper, which requires sacrifice but provides meaning and purpose. That's why MTD is sometimes called the church of benign whateverism. The majority of people can agree to its principles, but it's not anything that can give our lives meaning or direction. On the other hand, Christianity has the potential to offend people. It makes demands of its followers, setting an expectation for living. C. S. Lewis once said, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” People argue about Christianity because there's something worthwhile there to get riled up about. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a shadow, an echo of faith, providing the appearance of religion with none of passion or importance.

We don't want to be a church of benign-whateverism. We don't want to go through the motions, remaining unchanged by the power of an almighty God. We don't want religion as a social courtesy, we want to participate in a living faith that gives us meaning and purpose. So how do we get there?

The same study that discovered Moralistic Therapeutic Deism also discovered four principles that helped people find a faith of significance. We all need those four things: a creed, a call, a community, a hope. What's a creed? It's a statement of belief. You can find some famous ones in the very front of the hymnal, but that's not what this survey discovered. You don't need

to memorize a creed. You need to actually have a creed. If someone asked you what you believe about God, or salvation, or resurrection, or forgiveness, could you answer them? You need to know what you do believe and what you don't believe. This will change in small and large ways over the course of your life. But as the old saying goes, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

Of course, many of the kids who claimed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism had a creed – it just wasn't a creed that lived up to the challenge of Christianity. Christians also need to have a call. A purpose. A reason for living and moving and being in the world. I am called to pastoral ministry, but you may be called to medicine. Or being a good parent. Or volunteering your time. Or doing anything that you might do not for yourself, but for the glory of God. And that's key, because MTD is a religion all about serving the self. Christianity is about serving God and others.

A creed, a call, a community. This survey found that even if you had a creed and a call, you needed the benefits of a community. Christianity challenges us to live in the face of what MTD and our culture tell us. We need others to remind us that we're not crazy, just different. It's dangerous to try to be a Christian on your own.

Finally, as Christians, we need to claim the hope that Christ has given us. We have hope for our future because of what our faith story tells us. We have hope for today, hope for tomorrow, hope for eternity. Hope that God is active and working in the world to bring us to wholeness. To create a reality where God's Kingdom weaves through everyone and everything.

The Church of Work Nice, Play Nice, Be Nice doesn't get me excited. The Church of Don't Worry; Be Happy doesn't give me any sense of meaning or purpose. But the church of

Jesus Christ gives me a creed, a call, a community and a hope. And that's something worth claiming and sharing with the rest of the world. Amen and amen.

Children's Time

(Load the trunk up so it's too heavy to move.)

Ask for a volunteer to drag the trunk to the center this morning. Because it's too hard. Sometimes Jesus asks us to do things that are really hard. Like loving people who are mean.

Jesus had a chat with his disciples about how people who follow him have to do more than most people. He says everyone loves their friends and their family. Even people who aren't very nice are nice to their friends. As Christians, we are to love even our enemies. Even school bullies. And Jesus said the same thing applies when we help people. Lots of people are willing to help others, but as Christians, we have to be willing to help everyone. Even the people we know will never take their turn and help us.

But that's really hard, isn't it? What do you think we could do to make it easier to move the trunk? We could all work together. And that's one of the things that helps us do what Jesus asked. If we work together and remind each other about Jesus, it's a little easier to love and help everyone. It's never going to be easy, but at least we know we don't have to try all by ourselves.