

Gotham Devotional – Saturday Morning

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

C. S. Lewis will be remembered as one of the most important Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. He was born in Ireland in 1900, and the major part of his adult years was spent as a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he taught medieval literature. It was in 1931 that he was "surprised by joy," Lewis's own description of his conversion to Christianity. A brilliant scholar and writer, Lewis used his talents to reach thousands through the printed and spoken word.

He and a group of friends (including J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*) gathered once a week to share their writings. During those years Lewis produced his famous work *The Screwtape Letters*. In the early 1940s he delivered talks on various Christian topics over British radio. His fame grew throughout Great Britain and spread to the United States. Out of those talks came the book *Mere Christianity*, a penetrating work on Christian apologetics. Countless Christians point to this book as an essential part of their faith journey. If sales are an indication of popularity, then C. S. Lewis--even thirty years after his death--is one of the most popular Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. In the following passage Lewis discusses the question, 'Is Christianity hard or easy?'

EXCERPTS FROM *MERE CHRISTIANITY*

1. How Much of Myself Must I Give?

The ordinary idea which we all have before we become Christians is this. We take as the starting point our ordinary self with its various desires and interests. We then admit that something else--call it "morality" or "decent behavior," or "the good of society"--has claims on this self: claims which interfere with its own desires. What we mean by "being good" is giving in to those claims. Some of the things the ordinary self wanted to do turn out to be what we call "wrong": well, we must give them up. Other things turn out to be what we call "right": well, we shall have to do them. But we are hoping all the time that when all the demands have been met, the poor natural self will still have some chance, and some time, to get on with its own life and do what it likes. In fact, we are very like an honest man paying his taxes. He pays them all right, but he does hope that there will be enough left over for

him to live on. Because we are still taking our natural self as the starting point.

2. Two Results

As long as we are thinking that way, one or the other of two results is likely to follow. Either we give up trying to be good, or else we become very unhappy indeed. For, make no mistake: if you are really going to try to meet all the demands made on the natural self, it will not have enough left over to live on. The more you obey your conscience, the more your conscience will demand of you. And your natural self, which is thus being starved and hampered and worried at every turn, will get angrier and angrier. In the end, you will either give up trying to be good, or else become one of those people who, as they say, "live for others" but always in a discontented, grumbling way--always wondering why the others do not notice it more and always making a martyr of yourself. And once you have become that you will be a far greater pest to anyone who has to live with you than you would have been if you had remained frankly selfish.

3. Harder and Easier

The Christian way is different: harder, and easier. Christ says, "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked--the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will all become yours." Both harder and easier than what we are all trying to do. You have noticed, I expect, that Christ Himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard, sometimes as very easy. He says, "Take up your Cross"--in other words, it is like going to be beaten to death in a concentration camp. Next minute he says, "My yoke is easy and my burden light." He means both. And one can just see why both are true.

4. The Most Dangerous Thing

Teachers will tell you that the laziest boy in the class is the one who works the hardest in the end. They mean this. If you give two boys, say, a proposition in geometry to do, the one who is prepared to take trouble will try to understand it. The lazy boy will learn it by

heart because, for the moment, that needs less effort. But six months later, when they are preparing for the exam, that lazy boy is doing hours and hours of miserable drudgery over things the other boy understands, and positively enjoys, in a few minutes. Laziness means more work in the long run. Or look at it this way. In a battle, or in mountain climbing, there is often one thing which it takes a lot of pluck to do; but it is also, in the long run, the safest thing to do. If you funk it, you will find yourself, hours later, in far worse danger. The cowardly thing is also the most dangerous thing.

5. The Almost Impossible Thing

It is like that here. The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self-all your wishes and precautions-to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call "ourselves," to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be "good." We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way---centered on money or pleasure or ambition-and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short; but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and resown.

6. Listening to That Other Voice

That is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind. We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through. He never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, "Be perfect," He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder-in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while

remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

7. The Reason the Church Exists

May I come back to what I said before? This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects-education, building, missions, holding services. Just as it is easy to think the State has a lot of different objects-military, political, economic, and what not. But in a way things are much simpler than that. The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden-that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time. In the same way the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.

GOTHAM FALL RETREAT DEVOTIONALS

BIBLE SELECTION: LUKE 14:25-33 (NIV)

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

Reflection Questions:

1. C. S. Lewis stresses the need to give all areas of our lives to God. What do you find most difficult about giving all to God?
2. Describe how you would feel if Jesus came to you and spoke the words Lewis quotes in section 3 ("Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want ...").
3. According to Lewis, the hardest road we can take in life is the one that appears the easiest (e.g., the boy who waits until the end of the semester to cram for a test). How have your experiences confirmed or denied his claim?
4. The pursuit of personal happiness by being morally good, says Lewis, ends in frustration. What is his reasoning behind this? Do you agree or disagree?
5. In Luke 14:25-33, Jesus encourages those who would follow him to "count the cost" of being one of his disciples. What has being a Christian cost you?

Reflections

The contrast between God's way of doing things and our way is never more acute than in this area of human change and transformation. We focus on specific actions; God focuses on us. We work from the outside in; God works from the inside out. We try; God transforms.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Source: Foster, R.J. and J.B. Smith, *Devotional Classics : Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*. 1993, [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco. ix, 353 p.

Gotham Devotional – Sunday Morning

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a Congregational pastor and a key figure in the eighteenth-century "Great Awakening." He is considered one of America's greatest theologians. Born in Connecticut and educated at Yale, he ministered for twenty-three years at a church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He later became a missionary to the Indians at Stockbridge. In 1758 he was named president of Princeton University but died only a few weeks after taking office.

Edwards produced a theology of Christian spirituality for his age that blended together Lockean philosophy and his own Calvinist theology. His main concern was the question, How do we distinguish the presence of the Holy Spirit? Christian experience, according to Edwards, is a gift of God, but he spent his life working out the ways in which we define that experience. A central theme of his writings-evidenced in the following selection-is the importance of religious "affections," which he defined as the passions that move the will to act.

EXCERPTS FROM *Religious Affections*

1. Engagement of the Heart

The kind of religion that God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless "wouldings"-those weak inclinations that lack convictions-that raise us but a little above indifference. God, in his word, greatly insists that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and that our hearts be engaged vigorously in our religion: "Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Rom. 12:11, modified KJV).

"And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? To fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 10:12). This fervent, vigorous engagement of the heart is the fruit of a real circumcision of the heart that alone has the promise of life: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your children, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live" (Deut. 30:6).

2. Holy Affection

If we are not earnest in our religion, and if our wills and inclinations are not strongly exercised, we are nothing. The importance of religion is SO great that no halfhearted exercise will suffice. In nothing is the state of our heart so crucial as in religion, and in nothing is luke-warmness so odious.

True religion is a powerful thing. The power of it appears, first, in the inward exercises of the heart (which is the seat of all religion). Therefore, true religion is called "the power of godliness," in contrast to the external appearances of it, i.e., the mere "form": "Having the form of godliness but denying the power of it" (2 Tim. 3:5). The Spirit of God is a spirit of powerful holy affection in the lives of those who have a sound and solid religion. This is why it is written that God has given his people the spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7).

When we receive the Spirit of God, we receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost who is like "fire," and along with it the sanctifying and saving influences of God.. When this happens, when grace is at work within us, it sometimes "burns" within us, as it was for Jesus' disciples (Luke 24:32).

3. The Exercising of the Will

The work of religion has been compared to the doing of exercises, wherein we desire to have our hearts engaged in God. Metaphors like "running the race," "wrestling with God," "striving for the great prize," and "fighting with strong enemies" are often used to describe the exercises we engage in.

But true grace has varying degrees. There are some who are new in the faith—"babes in Christ"—in whom the inclination to engage in these exercises is weak. Yet every one of us who has the power of godliness in our heart will be inclined to seek the things of God. And whatever our state, this power will give us strength enough to overcome our weak inclinations so that these holy exercises will prevail over our weaknesses.

For every true disciple of Christ loves him above father and mother, sister and brother, spouse and children, houses and land-yes, even above his own life. From this it follows that wherever true religion is, there is a will that moves that person to spiritual exercises. But what we said before must be remembered: the exercising of the will is nothing other than the affections of the soul.

4. The Spring of Action

The nature of human beings is to be inactive unless influenced by some affection: love

or hatred, desire, hope, fear, etc. These affections are the "spring of action," the things that set us moving in our lives, that move us to engage in activities.

When we look at the world, we see that people are exceedingly busy. It is their affections that keep them busy. If we were to take away their affections, the world would be motionless and dead; there would be no such thing as activity. It is the affection we call covetousness that moves a person to seek worldly profits; it is the affection we call ambition that moves a person to pursue worldly glory; it is the affection we call lust that moves a person to pursue sensual delights. Just as worldly affections are the spring of worldly actions, so the religious affections are the spring of religious actions.

5. A Heart Deeply Affected

A person who has a knowledge of doctrine and theology only—without religious affection—has never engaged in true religion. Nothing is more apparent than this: our religion takes root within us only as deep as our affections attract it. There are thousands who hear the Word of God who hear great and exceedingly important truths about themselves and their lives, and yet all they hear has no effect upon them, makes no change in the way they live.

The reason is this: they are not affected with what they hear. There are many who hear about the power, the holiness and the wisdom of God; about Christ and the great things that he has done for them and his gracious invitation to them; and yet they remain exactly as they are in life and in practice.

I am bold in saying this, but I believe that no one is *ever* changed, either by doctrine, by hearing the Word, or by the preaching or teaching of another, unless the affections are moved by these things. No one ever seeks salvation, no one *ever* cries for wisdom, no one ever wrestles with God, no one ever kneels in prayer or flees from sin, with a heart that remains unaffected. In a word, there is never any great achievement by the things of religion without a heart deeply affected by those things.

6. True Religion

The Holy Scriptures clearly see religion as a result of affections, namely, the affections of fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion and zeal.

The Scriptures see religion as the result of holy *fear*. Truly religious persons tremble at the Word of God. It is his holiness that makes them fear. The fear of God is a great part of godliness. So also, *hope* in God and in the promises of God, according to the Scriptures, is a *very* important part of true religion. It is mentioned as one of the three great things of which religion consists (1 Cor. 13:13). "Happy is the one whose hope is in the Lord" (Ps. 146:5). It

is spoken of as the helmet of the Christian soldier, "the hope of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8). It is a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19).

7. Participation in the Blessings

So also, *love* is given a high place in the Scriptures as a proper affection. We are called to love God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and our neighbor. The texts that speak of the importance of love are too many to mention. The contrary affection- hatred-is also a part of true religion, but in the sense that we hate sin and evil: "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13). Also, *holy desire*, which finds its expression in longing and thirsting after God, is also a part of true religion. "As the deer pants after the watering stream, so my soul pants after you, O Lord" (ps. 42:1-2). Jesus also said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). This holy thirst is spoken of as a condition of participation in the blessings of eternal life.

Also, the Scriptures speak of *joy* as a great part of true religion. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he shall give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). It is mentioned among the principal fruits of the Spirit of grace: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, ..." (Gal. 5:22).

8. A Pleasing and Acceptable Sacrifice

Religious sorrow, mourning, and brokenness of heart are also frequently spoken of as a great part of true religion, a distinguishing quality of the saints. "Blessed are they that mourn," said Jesus, "for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

It is also a pleasing and acceptable sacrifice to God: "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" Ps. 51:17).

Another affection often mentioned is *gratitude*, the exercise of which much of true religion consists, especially as exercised in thankfulness and praise to God. This is spoken of so much in the Book of Psalms and other parts of the Bible I need not mention any particular texts.

In addition, the Holy Scriptures also speak of *compassion* as an essential affection in true religion, so much so that all of the good characters in the Bible demonstrate it. The Scriptures choose this quality as the one which will determine who is righteous: "The righteous show mercy" (Ps. 37:21). It is our way of honoring God: "He that honors the Lord shows mercy to the poor" (Prov. 14:31). Jesus himself said it is the way we obtain mercy: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

9. Missing from the Lukewarm

I have mentioned only a few texts out of an innumerable multitude to show that throughout the Bible, true religion is placed in the affections. The only way to deny this claim is to use some rule other than the Bible by which to measure the nature of true religion.

¹⁴ To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. ¹⁵ Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. ¹⁶ Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. ²⁰ Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. ²² Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

1. According to Edwards, what is "the spring of action," the source of motivation behind everything we do?

5. Beginning in section 6, Edwards lists and describes nine affections that Scripture encourages us to have: holy fear, hope, love, holy desire, joy, religious sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal. Which of these affections have you felt the most? In which would you most like to see growth?

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