

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Why Christianity: Why Christianity should make me a better person

Can Christianity make me a better person? What a mind-blowing question! Can Christianity make me a better person? The answer, of course, depends on the meaning of “Christianity”, the definition of a “better person” and the “power” needed to make any change.

So what do we mean by these things? Well, the word “Christians” was first used by the people of a city called Antioch. Acts 11:26 states: “...And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” They were so-called because they followed the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and sought to live their lives as He lived. This gives us the key to defining a “better” person. The Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect example of a person who could be classed as “good”. The reason I say this is that the Biblical record reveals that He was sinless. That is to say, He lived in a way that always pleased God in thought, word and deed. In fact, the Bible tells us He could not sin at all. The objective of His life was to glorify God His Father. In John 17:4 He is found speaking to His Father, saying, “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.” He has revealed God to us as a loving Father by both His actions and His words. He has finished the work of redemption that His Father sent Him into the world to do. He led a perfect life! He died the most atrocious death on our behalf! He has conquered death; and is, Himself, now exalted at the right hand of God.

In contrast, we, as human beings, are slaves to sin. From the king upon his throne to the tramp in the gutter we all have Sin as a taskmaster. In Romans 3:23 we read: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Not only have we all sinned, but we can't help sinning. Sin rules over us! Try getting through the next hour without committing a wrong thought or a wrong action. You'll find it's impossible! Romans 6:23 informs us: “...The wages of sin is death.” This master called “Sin” pays wages; but they are not wages we would desire – death!

Now death has two aspects. First, there is physical death - a separation of body, soul and spirit. Second, there is a second death - a separation from God for eternity. This death is also called “Hell” emphasising it is a state of ruin. It is also called the “Lake of Fire” emphasising the torment found therein. Hell was, of course, originally created for the devil and the wicked angels for whom there is no mercy. As far as they are concerned, God is a holy God and His judgment is perfect. Therefore, Hell is their righteous punishment.

However, we, as human beings, know God is also a God of love. He will do His utmost to deliver souls from such a fate. It is, therefore, a joy to read the second half of Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Here we have the opposite of the second death, namely, eternal life. This is both a length of life and a quality of life. The length is everlasting. The quality is living with and for God and being perpetually blessed by Him.

When you place your trust in the Son of the living God, this life is yours! It is written that those who believe on the name of the Son of God know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). Well, you might say, I can see how this life may be the case in heaven, but how can we see it on earth? You can see how to live this life on earth by exploring the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because He is eternal life personified! 1 John 5:20 says of Him: “This is the true God, and eternal life.”

It may be asked, “Why is this life only given through the Lord Jesus Christ?” The answer relates to the cross where God righteously dealt with the question of man's sin. Death claimed a sinless Person! The judgment of God against sin fell upon His own eternal Son! This is confirmed by 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For He [God] hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” The true believer in Christ is made righteous by God because of this one sacrifice that was more than sufficient for time and eternity.

It has been shown that a good person is one who is Christ-like and glorifies God. The more like Christ a person is, the better He is. However, we have also seen that there are no “good” people in their own right because all do wrong. So how can a Christian be classed as a better person than any other? This brings us to the “power” that brings about this positive change. When people, through a meaningful consideration of God's word, choose to put their faith in the living God then the Spirit of God is given to indwell them. The Lord Jesus indicated this indwelling to His disciples in John 14:17: “Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: but ye

know Him; for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.” Speaking to Christians at Corinth, the apostle Paul said, “What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). So just as the body of the Lord Jesus Himself was a temple in which God’s Spirit lived (John 2:19), so the bodies of Christians are said to be temples inhabited by the same Spirit.

There is a beautiful passage in the book of Ephesians 1:11-14 that describes how this blessing comes about. It reads: “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.” The process is clearly outlined as:

1. They heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation.
2. They believed it.
3. They exercised faith in Christ.
4. They were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of a future inheritance.
5. Their bodies will be redeemed in a future day completing the redemption of the whole of their beings.

The seal, itself, speaks of ownership. Being sealed with the Spirit shows that we belong to God and will be eternally blessed. But that same Spirit is the power that enables Christians to live a life that pleases God. They are made better because they now love righteousness and hate iniquity. They have been born again in a spiritual sense. As such, they have a new and divine nature; and righteousness, rather than sin, reigns over them. Romans 6:18 states: “Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.” Furthermore, the Christian is classed as a child of God.

How important it is to note that this is not achieved by a religion of any kind. It is achieved through the work of God - God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. It is equally important to underline that Christians, even though indwelt by the Spirit of God, do fail in thought and action. A battle is raging within them! Their old, sinful nature still raises its head against the new nature. That is why the following is written to believers: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10).

So, Christians are to judge their sins before God who, because of the sacrifice of Christ, can faithfully and justly forgive those sins. If Christians do not confess their sins before God, then they can expect to come under His hand of discipline. Hebrews 12:5-8 reminds us of this in the following way: “...My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?”

This leads us to consider the aspects of expected Christian behaviour. First of all, we find that Jesus spoke of love. Love of God and love of our neighbours (who may be seen as those in need). It has been well said that love is that which always seeks the highest good for its object. Therefore, love for God will be seen in:

- Worshipping Him;
- Witnessing of Him;
- Working for Him;
- Walking with Him; and
- Warring under Him.

Love for our neighbours will be seen in two of these. Firstly, it is found in the witnessing. If salvation is found in Christ alone, then it must follow that we would desire that God’s blessing might be passed on to others. In this way, we reflect the heart of God who is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Secondly, love is found in the work that Christians do for God. They should be found bringing comfort, encouragement, support, help and provisions to others in a variety of ways. An example of this is found in the question posed by the Apostle John in 1 John 3:17: “...Whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” The Apostle Paul encouraged believers in this way: “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you...” (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

Sydney Carter captures this thought in the lyrics of the song: “*When I Needed a Neighbour*”. The first verse states:

*When I needed a neighbour
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a neighbour
Were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter
Were you there?*

He goes on to speak of needs that regularly arise in a difficult world. They include: food and water, warmth and clothing; shelter; and things medical. Even as I write, the people of Pakistan have been devastated by massive flooding. Dear Christian, they need all these things. Has their need moved our hands (in love) to help? Or do we procrastinate and ultimately do nothing?

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself went about doing good. Even though constantly challenged by those who sought His downfall, He was determined to do the will of God. Though mocked, tormented and tortured, he remained faithful, even praying for the forgiveness of His enemies. Christian, if you will live a godly life in Christ Jesus, then you can expect similar things to happen to you. Are you prepared to take up the cross and suffer its shame for the name of your Lord? The Christian life is the most difficult life on earth. It is a life that delights to give of time, energy, skills and resources – all to glorify God or to benefit others.

We have already seen that the Holy Spirit is the indwelling person who is able to mould a person to be more like Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit is found in Galatians 5:22-23 and includes: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. As love is central to this fruit, we could say:

Love is the outcome of faith;
Joy is love exulting;
Peace is love resting;
Longsuffering is love enduring;
Gentleness is love healing;
Goodness is love living;
Faith is love assuring;
Meekness is love serving; and
Temperance is love controlling.

How does your life match up to these things?

I now briefly digress to consider the word “temperance” in more detail. This word simply means “self-control”. I mention this specifically today because there are people who give up self-control when supposedly being moved by the Spirit of God. They claim that the Spirit is within them because they have submitted completely to Him and may be “smitten” or driven in some “peculiar ways”. However, this is a signal to us as Christians that such claims are totally false. God expects us to have self-control at all times!

The thought-life of Christians is also delineated by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” How does your thought-life match up? To what kind of TV programmes do you subject your mind? What do you view on, or download from, the Internet? What kind of books or magazines are you reading? How much of your thought life is spent in the Word of God and in God’s activities in this world? From all these we can see that the standards of behaviour expected in Christians have the highest moral and spiritual value; but we haven’t yet considered the direct teachings of Jesus, Himself.

Here are just a few taken from Luke 6:27-35: “But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.”

In conclusion, we can see if "Christianity" speaks of the work of God (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), then it can make you a better person. However, if it is considered as a religion of rules and regulations then it could easily cause you to despair at your own failure. When we consider the life and teaching of Christ in the Scriptures, we "naturally" find many of the aspects impossible to implement; but God has graciously given Christians a nature that wants to do His will and He has empowered them by His Spirit making godly lives a possibility.

We have also touched upon the fact that Christians are not yet perfected. They may fall into sin on many occasions in a single day and are grieved by their failure. However, God has supplied a way of confession by which sins may be righteously cleared because of the sacrifice of Christ. Mark the fact that true Christians do not practise sin. They do not delight in doing wrong. We have also noted the highest standards of moral and practical behaviours that indicate a godly life; but we must remember that we are not saved by our own works. We are saved by the grace of God. In Ephesians 2:8-10 the apostle Paul tells us how we are saved by grace and not works of our own and, once saved, we can go on to do good works because they are for God's gain and not for our own. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

Sadly, there are many people who claim to be Christians; but their lifestyle denies their confession. In fact, they may live lives that are so awful, that others are put off Christianity altogether. The Lord Jesus Christ challenges all who confess His name with these words found in Luke 6:46: "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"

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