

“Moralism” By: Doug Warren

Why is Moralism so dangerous?

One of the most common misunderstandings about Christianity is that it is a system of morality. In fact, moralism is one of the greatest enemies to Christianity and indeed to every human heart.

Moralism is an approach to life that stresses the rules. It rewards those who follow the code of conduct with the notion that they are virtuous as a result of obedience to their moral system. It doesn't matter whether this is expressed in the old school vocabulary of being a “good person” or in the nouveau vernacular of “authentic.” The backbone for the entire species of moralists is finding our integrity in our being or performance. We are very adept at either finding value measurements with which we can comply or constructing such lofty goals that even our failure to meet them can be deemed laudable. Either way it is our attempt to measure our moral success that drives our attitude and actions.

Of course there is a long history of moralistic approaches to Christianity. Many have dearly loved the moral code of the Bible and devoutly attempted to keep all its regulations and commands. But this is not the Christianity that the Bible itself encourages its readers to practice. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. Jesus reserved His harshest criticism for the leading moralists of His time. He pointed out that all of their rigorous obedience, far from making them good, only added to their culpability.

Why did He speak so vehemently against moralists? This whole approach to life is antithetical to Jesus' message and purpose. But even more than that, Jesus realized that moralism is ultimately destructive to the human heart. It was His love for people, not a self-serving agenda, that sparked His ire against this false virtuosity. As the designer and creator of the human heart, Jesus knew that what it needs is the softening of repentance, not the hardening of moralism.

When we focus on our attempts at goodness/authenticity we are led to compare ourselves with others. How do we measure up? Are we good enough? Are we genuine enough? As a way of life this constant measuring results in us being less charitable to others rather than more so. It hinders our ability to consider them as more important than ourselves, often leading to a sense of moral superiority. In short it undermines the very virtues that we are striving for. And more tragically it ends up crushing us with the weight of our inabilities. Moralism gives the appearance of virtue, but masks the reality of hopeless and death to which it drives all its adherents. Jesus called moralists “white-washed tombs” for just this reason—while pretty on the outside, they were full of decay inside.

When we think of Christianity as another way of trying to do good or be authentic we miss the heart of Jesus. He came to earth precisely because we don't do good and we are not authentic. The Bible presents Jesus not as a moral example for us to follow, but as the holy and perfect God, who knowing our failure, loved us and came to rescue us from it. The sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross was not an object lesson in doing good, but the satisfaction of God's wrath for our evil.

The good news of what Jesus has done for us is that we can be free of the tyranny of moralism. Our virtue is not a product of what we do or even aspire to, but is based on His perfect obedience and sacrificial death. This is what frees us to do good not out of fear, but love.

We have four young children that we love dearly. Because we love them we have set boundaries for them. There are things that we require them to do and other things we do not permit them to do. You might think of those standards as family rules. What if one of our neighbors comes to our home and keeps all the rules? Will they become a Warren? What if our children don't keep the rules? Will they no longer be Warrens? No, because being in our family is not determined by keeping the family code of conduct. We want them to obey, not because they must, but because knowing our love and acceptance of them, they want to mature in the ways we are directing them.

Moralism is the liar who would whisper to our children (and you), "Mommy and Daddy will love you more if you obey." It is false for our family and it is false in relation to God's family. If your own sense of virtue is dependant on what Jesus did for you, then you are as deeply loved and accepted as is ever possible by God Himself. Nothing you ever do or don't do can change that one bit. In that freedom then we will want to obey Him rather than slavishly trying to appease Him.

If you would like to talk with me more about how you can experience that kind of true freedom, I would love to talk with you on the phone or by email. Please call me or send me a note. I am praying for you, neighbor, that you would know the freedom that Jesus brings.