

Written Assignment in lieu of Youth Rally Participation

Purpose

An 800 word essay to make up for class attendance when ***NOT*** participating in the Diocesan Youth Rally at Bishop Gorman High School. To be completed typed, and double spaced.

Instructions

Read the attached article and write an 800 word essay which includes answers to the following questions:

- What from the article do you relate with most? Why?
- What from the article do you agree/disagree with? Why?
- Describe a time in your life when something you believed required you to change your behavior.
- How has the article challenged or reaffirmed your lived out approach to faith in God?

NOTE: This is an essay. Do not number and create short answers to the above questions, but rather include them in your complete essay response to the article. It is expected that proper grammar and full sentences are used to express your thoughts and ideas. It is also expected that this is completed as an individual assignment, there will be no plagiarism or jointly completed assignments.

WILL WORK FOR SALVATION



*"I wish not merely to be called Christian, but also to be Christian."
— St. Ignatius of Antioch*

Should the things we believe cause changes in our actions? Not necessarily. I can think of a case in which I believe that unicorns exist, but it would not necessitate a change in behavior, unless I decided to begin a career chasing these mythical creatures. However I can think of a multitude of other cases in which the things we believe at the very least *ought* to change our behavior, and a few others that do necessitate changes in behavior. In the latter case I believe that human beings cannot fly without employing some machine that makes use of great speeds and can produce lift. When I learned this as a child I had to resolve that my Superman cape was merely for imagination and I must not try to jump off the second story roof of my parents house. It was a heartbreaking discovery, but in conforming my actions to my belief it saved my life, or at least saved me from serious injury. I think there are numeral beliefs of this sort. As for the beliefs that *ought* to change our behavior but don't

necessitate the change I can think of an example where my belief that my personal happiness is not the greatest good *ought* to make me more charitable to others, but in reality laziness, pride, and selfishness prevent any real change.

My question for discussion then is to which category does belief in God belong? Does it belong in the first category of belief where believing that God exists or does not exist is like believing whether unicorns do or do not exist. Making our response to this belief purely subjective, allowing those who want to make a living out of searching for God free to do so, but those who don't care either way just as free to ignore their belief. Or does it belong to the second category in which belief in God *ought* to change our actions, but does not necessitate change. Meaning that if we believe God exists we *ought* to live lives in accordance with that belief and if that belief is in a just God who punishes the wicked we *ought* not be wicked. Or if we

believe that God does not exist, then we *ought* to live in pursuit of our own happiness at all cost, after all life is short and no one gets out alive. Thirdly does belief in God fall under the final category of necessitating change. Thus to say "I believe in God" is redundant because someone from the outside could look at your actions and already know you believe in God. Conversely to say "I don't believe in God" would be just as redundant for actions speak louder than words. I would like to put forth that belief in God belongs to this final category. I think that belief in God necessitates a change in behavior or else it is not a belief in God. After all if I really believe that I cannot fly my belief would be immediately negated the moment I don a cape and stepped off a building.

This brings me to the notion of nominal faith. Is Christianity in name alone really Christianity? Does calling one's self a Christian make it true? Rather than expounding my own thoughts on the matter I prefer to let Jesus himself settle this question:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."
— *Matthew 7:21*

Only those who believe Jesus is the Messiah refer to him as "Lord" thus the people crying out "Lord, Lord" are self-professing believers, yet Jesus says they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. No, labeling yourself a Christian does not guarantee you a seat in God's Kingdom, rather we are obliged to do the will of the Father for a seat in the Kingdom. Nowhere in the New Testament is this principle more explicit and elaborate than in the second chapter of the Book of James. Here James speaks of faith and works and he begins by asking the question:

"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"
— *James 2:14*

He proceeds to discuss how faith without works is meaningless and uses the Old Testament figures Abraham and Rahab as examples of faith leading to works and it was through those works of faith where they were justified and were called friends of God. He concludes in verse 26 with a very powerful statement that his irritating from verse 17: "faith without works is dead". Strong words from the one called the Brother of the Lord. This principle is what is St. Paul calls the "obedience of faith". Our faith is not a mere assent to ideas, or the claiming of a name as if to obtain inheritance through fraud, but rather a faith of action.

What does this mean for my walk with the Lord? This principle frightened me when I first learned it. I was worried that my lack of obedience, my lack of good works, would inherit the damnation I do not desire rather than the Heavenly banquet for which my heart longs. How do I reconcile the mercy of God who forgives my weakness and the justice of God that demands my obedience? Little did I know that these very questions were the promptings of the Holy Spirit in my life and were the beginnings of true conversion.

I had always called myself a Christian, my parents were Christians, I went to Church every week, and I know more about the Bible and the Faith than your average adult, but I had not always lived out what I knew and believed. I indulged in my own selfish quest for what I thought would make me happy and engaged in all sorts of sins that I knew my faith forbade. Thus this encounter with the obedience of faith shook me to the core. I heard the words of St. James echoing in my head:

*"You believe in God! Even the demons believe that."
— James 2:19*

Was I no better than a demon, and if so was I destined for eternal fire that is prepared for them as well? For the first time I felt a overwhelming sense of worthlessness. I began to scrutinize my actions and I realized that my life is best summed up by mortal sin, and all the study and knowledge of faith was like a white washed tomb. Sure it looked nice on the outside but on the inside it was dead. I could hear the voices of my accusers saying to me "Who does he think he is? He acts holy but I know him and he is definitely not holy! What a hypocrite! He is what is wrong with the Church!" What was worse was that those who could see passed my holy facade were those who knew me best; those who have seen me at my worst. It may very well have been I who Brennan Manning spoke of when he wrote:

"The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

Rather than drawing people to Christ with my intellect, I pushed them away from him with my actions. This was perhaps the most despicable sin of which I was guilty. Jesus said it this way:

*"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."
— Matthew 18:6*

It was here where I heard another voice. In the midst of my self-loathing a new

prophet called to me. One whose voice I recognized, but had been hidden away, buried under all my sinfulness. This voice simply said "repent". At first I was bewildered at this quiet call. I thought that calling myself a Christian meant I had already repented. Yet the voice called out all the louder: "repent"! It was this call that lead me to the cross. I had been to the feet of Jesus at the cross countless times before, but never as humiliated and ashamed as that day. All I could muster to pray was "I'm so sorry" as I wept in the pew.

This is conversion. It leads to the cross and reconciliation but it can be the most dangerous place to be in terms of spiritual warfare. John 16:8-11 reveals the identity of the voice that called out to me in the depths of my sin. It is the advocate the Holy Spirit sent by God to indwell in us for a threefold mission:

1. Convict the us in sin
2. Convince us of Jesus' righteousness
3. Reveal the one who has been condemned.

The steps I walked through were the conviction in sin. In the Christian life there comes a point where we must reconcile our actions with our faith. We must recognize within us, with the clarity of St. Paul,

*"I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want."
— Romans 7:19*

This is the first job of the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize our sinfulness. This primary function is why Jesus said that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgiveable sin. For to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to claim, in a confident and final way, that the sins which the Holy Spirit brings to your attention are in fact no sin at all. After all how can Jesus cleanse us of our sins if we refuse to admit that there is a sin? It is tantamount to

the heroin addict who overdoses never admitting that he was addicted in the first place. It is impossible to help someone who does not acknowledge that they need help. In the same way it is impossible for Jesus to save someone if they do not think they need a savior. But admitting to sins is a dangerous place to be. It is the meadow where the devil prowls like a tiger seeking to devour unsuspecting prey. The Book of Revelation tells us that the devil stands day and night accusing us before God. God is not fooled by the empty accusations of the devil, but we can be. It is this voice that says to us "See how wicked you are!? Who could possibly love you! You want to seek God after all this? What a joke! Your life is a fraud!" If left here one could easily fall into depression and despair left to wonder "Where is God?", and begin to think that God does not desire them.

The Holy Spirit then leads us to the Cross. It is here where Jesus resides and all righteousness is fulfilled. This is the second function of the Holy Spirit: to convince us of Jesus' righteousness. Jesus' death on the cross looked like a disgraceful capital punishment of a wretched criminal. It looked like exactly what I know I deserve for my own rebellion against the God who loved me into existence. Yet, the Holy Spirit shows us that in reality righteousness has triumphed, for Jesus has risen and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. It means that this punishment of mine Jesus took upon himself. He transformed the instrument meant to punish into a sign of his mercy. By rising from the dead Jesus broke death itself. If people rise from the dead then the fear of death has lost meaning. Then he invited us to share in his death and resurrection participating in his sacrifice that served as an expiation for our sinfulness.

"We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as

Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life."

— Romans 6:4

When brought to recognition of our sin the accuser tells us how worthless we are because of it, but the advocate brings us to the cross to show us how loved we are in spite of it. The Spirit brings us to a renewed recognition of what Jesus has done for us, and this renewed recognition leads us to detest our sins and seek to divorce ourselves from them.

Finally the Holy Spirit reveals the one who is truly condemned: the devil. He who ultimately and finally rejects the mercy of God is the one who will be eternally separated from him. It was the devil who from the beginning of time bore witness to the plan of God's mercy and cried out "*non serviam*" (I will not serve). I will not follow a God who offers mercy to the unjust. The devil cries out to the Father "Punish them for their crimes!" whilst Jesus cries out "Father forgive them for they know not what they do!" Thus only the accuser and those who accompany in his rejection of God's mercy are condemned to an eternity apart from he who is the fullness of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Love. Jesus invites us to a share in his inheritance, and so does the devil. To reject the Holy Spirit's call to repentance and to reject the act of mercy Jesus offers on the cross bequeaths an inheritance devoid of love.

This is where the practical meets the theological. Our belief in God requires we acknowledge the sins we have committed, seek the mercy of Jesus, and reject the lies of the devil. But this is only the beginning of our behavioral change. Jesus assures the woman caught in adultery of his mercy and charges her: "From now on do not sin anymore." Faith comes with the command to sin no more. A difficult demand indeed, a demand amplified by our habits of sin, by the

weakness in our will, and by the influence of the culture and company we keep. It is in my own weakness when I desire the sin that once led me to weeping and disgust. When I am tired, run down, and overwhelmed is when the invitation to partake in the forbidden fruit is whispered in my listening ear. G K Chesterton famously said:

"Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."
— G K Chesterton

And here I fall. Time and time again, and the accuser comes back even stronger. How could I have said that I have rejected and turned away from sin only to fall again. Yet Jesus reminds me that even though I sin against him 7 times he will forgive me 7x70 times. Jesus mercy abounds. But he did not demand that we avoid sin knowing that it was impossible. He demanded the avoidance of sin then gave us his own Spirit that we might be able to do just that. This is ultimately what the Gifts of the Spirit received in Baptism and strengthened in Confirmation are about. They are gifts bestowed upon us for the avoidance of sin, to bring us to perfection, and to bring others to the freedom of salvation. The gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, fortitude, council, piety, and fear of the Lord work in communion with one another helping us to recognize sin, battle it, arise triumphant, and bear witness to the world the power of God. The mark of belief in God is the struggle against sin. This is the work of the Christian. This is the work of salvation.

