

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

Look Up to God or Look Down on Other

by Trevon Wax

I've always been fascinated by the introduction to Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else... (Luke 18:9)

Luke describes Jesus' audience as people who did two things: (1) they trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and (2) they looked down on everyone else. Don't miss the connection between those two descriptions. They go together.

Spiritual short-sightedness leads to a sense of a spiritual superiority. When you trust in yourself that you are righteous, you look down on others. When you look down on others, you find you feel better about yourself. And on and on the cycle goes, with these two elements reinforcing each other.

Misplaced Trust

A judgmental spirit starts with misplaced trust. We live in a world that prizes the “self-made individual.” Trust in yourself. Believe in yourself. Do it yourself. All of these messages come to us in our society and encourage us to seek independence and to chart our own course in the world.

Apply that mindset to salvation, however, and you dig your own spiritual grave. The idea that you can work your way up to God, trusting in your own power and your own efforts, may seem noble and even praiseworthy in our world today. But this idea signifies a fundamental lack of self-awareness. The only way you can think you have what it takes to become righteous, that you have what it takes to please God is if you have lowered God's standard to something more attainable or if you have overlooked all the sin that keeps you from making the cut.

Looking In, Looking Down

Take a look at the second aspect of this description. The people who trusted in themselves looked down on everyone else. The crowd that Jesus was addressing had misplaced their trust, which led to a warped sense of the people around them. This lack of self-awareness about your sin is what leads you to a posture of self-righteousness.

Once you lower God down to a standard that is attainable, you no longer compare yourself to Him; you compare yourself to others. As long as you feel like you are doing better than the people around you, your sense of superiority grows. Listen to how C. S. Lewis describes this descent into the sin of spiritual superiority: All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred... A cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.

That's a tough pill to swallow, but it's true. And this text—just the situation that provides the context for Jesus' parable—is enough to show us how self-righteousness and spiritual superiority go together.

Do you see how the pattern of self-righteousness becomes more entrenched? First, you trust in yourself and become self-righteous, which leads you to look down on others. Second, you look down on others, and once you notice their sins, you trust even more in yourself, that you are more righteous than they are. And then you look down even more on others, etc. The cycle spins out of control until we are blinded by self-righteous posturing.

Gospel Hope

Thankfully, true Christianity smashes the cycle and tears up this pattern. According to the gospel, we are to trust in God alone for our salvation, and we trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness,” the old hymn goes. The gospel cuts to the heart of our tendency to trust in ourselves and in our own righteousness. The gospel also shatters the sense of superiority we may feel toward others.

As long as you are looking up to God for salvation, you can't look down on anyone else. Once you know how much you need the mercy of God, how in the world can you look down your nose on someone else in need of the same mercy?

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It Turns Out that Sexual Liberation Isn't All that Liberating

by David French

Over at *The Atlantic*, Bradford Wilcox and Lyman Stone have penned a fascinating piece exploring the roots of American unhappiness and tying it our nation's “sex recession” — a rather marked decrease in sexual activity by young adults. As Wilcox and Stone note: “The share of young adults having sex at least once a week has fallen from 59 percent in 1972 to 49 percent in 2018. This decline is far steeper among men: down from 58 percent of young men having sex at least weekly in 2010 to just 43 percent in 2018. And the share of young adults reporting no sex in the past year has risen as well, now at 22 percent for young men and 14 percent for young women in 2018.”

While Wilcox and Stone are focused on the frequency of sex as a key indicator of happiness (indeed, they argue that “changes in sexual frequency can account for about one-third of the decline in happiness since 2012 and almost 100 percent of the decline in happiness since 2014”), I want to pull out two other important facts from their piece. First, here they are discussing the link between marriage and happiness:

Controlling for basic demographics and other social characteristics, married young adults are about 75 percent more likely to report that they are very happy, compared with their peers who are not married, according to our analysis of the GSS, a nationally representative survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. As it turns out, the share of young adults who are married has fallen from 59 percent in 1972 to 28 percent in 2018.

And second, here they are describing the role of religious practice: “Young adults who attend religious services more than once a month are about 40 percent more likely to report that they are very happy, compared with their peers who are not religious at all, according to our analysis of the GSS. (People with very infrequent religious attendance are even less happy than never-attenders; in terms of happiness, a little religion is worse than none.) What's happening to religious attendance among young adults today? The share of young adults who attend religious services more than monthly has fallen from 38 percent in 1972 to 27 percent in 2018, even as the share who never attend has risen rapidly.”

Why is this so interesting? For generations, key elements of our cultural and academic elite have been arguing essentially the opposite — that liberation *from* religion and liberation *from* marriage were prerequisites to true human flourishing. If you asked an early era sexual revolutionary for his prediction for a culture with profoundly less religious practice, less marriage, and many fewer moral restraints on sexual practice, I sincerely doubt that he'd respond that he believed that culture would be less happy, with people having less sex. That's certainly not the dominant message of Hollywood, which for years has portrayed religion as mainly negative and marriage as all too often dreary, contentious, and sexless.

Ask yourself, how many happy, sexually vibrant religious married couples have you seen on popular television shows or movies — even in this era of fragmented, targeted entertainment? Compare that with the number of times you've seen rebellion from religion glorified and religious leaders mocked and despised. And while marriage fares better on the big and small screens, single people are generally portrayed as so sexually active that they behave unlike virtually anyone you've ever known. The collective message that's been delivered is something like this — singleness is exciting, religion is oppressive, and marriage is where you “settle down” (sometimes for good, sometimes for ill).

In reality, singleness is often stressful and lonely, religion provides community and purpose, and married people enjoy the excitement of more sex and the joys of unified child-rearing. Moreover, it's fascinating (as Charles Murray explored in his book *Coming Apart*) — the very cultural elites who've so often denigrated the traditional life tend not to practice the libertinism that they often preach or at least accept. America's upscale blue havens feature an intense concentration of “Leave it to Beaver” intact families. I'm not a person who believes that good art must always endorse good values, but it would be nice if the dominant tone of our pop culture wasn't an outright lie. And that goes double for the world of higher education, which at least has aspirations for the pursuit of truth. Faith and family aren't guarantors of human flourishing (nothing is), but our nation certainly feels their absence, and our culture aches at their loss.