

Visible Morality Insufficient

“Man looks on the outward appearance” —1 Samuel 16:7

Summary:

Mere morality is not conclusive evidence of Christian Character. The man who is merely moral is a stranger to the living God. Vital religion is an active inward principle. The spirit of piety not only lives in the heart, but flows forth in the life. Mere morality falls far short of the religion of the cross. There is a wide distinction between *moral virtues* and *Christian graces*. The man who is merely moral lacks the one thing needful.

Outline:

1. Mere morality is not conclusive evidence of Christian Character

- An unblemished moral character is in itself so amiable, that it not only commands the respect and esteem of others, but secures the confidence of those who possess it.

2. The man who is merely moral is a stranger to the living God

- The infinitely important duties which he owes to God, he keeps entirely out of sight.

3. Vital religion is an operative principle

- The spirit of piety not only lives in the heart, but flows forth in the life.

4. There is a wide distinction between moral virtues and Christian graces

- Christian graces spring from Christian motives. Moral virtues spring from selfish motives.

5. But after all, he wants the one thing needful

- He is without Christ; an alien from the commonwealth of Israel; a stranger from the covenants of promise.

Text

Many see morality as the narrow path that leads to life. A good moral character is admirable; it earns respect, esteem, and trust from others. If a man is honest, diligent, and controlled; keeps his promises and is punctual; and if he has a friendly, kind, generous, and noble spirit, he is considered to be a good man; if his outward behaviour is correct, he avoids all visible immorality and remains innocent and harmless. Look around the world and see the many who rest on outward morality for eternity.

However, a man who is only moral is a stranger to the living God. Although he maintains a spotless character in society's eyes, he might not believe in the Gospel's principles or live out the true religious duties.

He may strongly oppose all immorality; he is equally distant from the seriousness and spirituality of religion. He entirely overlooks the vital duties he owes to God, showing no knowledge of how to love or serve Him. He is honest with everyone except God. His adherence to external duties is merely superficial. Similar to the young man in the Gospel, he might not have committed murder, adultery, theft, or perjury since youth; however, like him, he may have stored up treasures for himself rather than being rich toward God. He is more earthly and sensual than heavenly and spiritual.

In God's view, such a character is fundamentally flawed. The morally upright person is like ancient Israel: an empty vine, because they bear fruit only for themselves. They are no better than the unproductive servant (Matthew 25:30) or the weed that is ultimately removed and thrown into unquenchable fire (Luke 13:7; Matthew 3:10, 12).

Genuine Christianity is an active principle rooted in the heart, manifesting through life. A healthy tree bears good fruit. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls men to be moral; however, it demands moral behaviour rooted in holy principles. The Gospel urges men to be honest, sober, industrious, and generous, but these virtues originate from gospel motives planted in the heart. As a person thinks in their heart, so they are (Proverbs 23:7).

The morality of actions depends on the heart's disposition behind them. So, a man might be honest, compassionate, and generous, yet if the heart's attitude behind these acts is not from God, he has no share in God's people.

The distinction is between moral virtues and Christian graces.

- **Christian graces** originate from Christian motives, which are inspired by the Gospel of Christ. They primarily focus on God's glory and the interests of His kingdom and then guide our interactions with others in accordance with His word.
- In contrast, **moral virtues** arise from self-interest. They ignore God's glory and His kingdom's interests, stopping where self-interest ends. This includes the virtues of those dead in trespasses and sins.

Will moral virtues withstand when spirits are tested? Every page in the Bible reminds us that mere morality is meaningless before God's eyes. A morally upright person may earn respect and trust from others more than an immoral one. They tend to be better rulers, subjects, parents, children, masters, and servants. However, they lack one vital element: they are children of wrath, without Christ, strangers to the covenants of promise. Despite any false hope they may cherish, they remain without God in the world.

This essay is taken from Gardiner Spring's Essays on the Distinguishing Traits of Christian Character
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