

Giving Up MTD for Lent AND for LIFE!

Based on Deut 28:1-13, Proverbs 12:1-7, Psalm 22:1-2, 6-8, & John 16:33
A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on March 10, 2024

What if I were to tell you that millions upon millions of Americans who consider themselves to be Christians actually believe in and practice a faith that is not Christianity at all? What if I were to tell you that this false teaching may have even infected some of us in this very congregation? Do I have your attention now?

Let me outline for you this subtle distortion of Christian teaching. The idea is that a good God created the world, and that God wants us to be good, kind people. If we are good and kind, we will live prosperous, safe, blessed lives, *and* get to go to heaven when it's all done.

Now, the tricky thing about this teaching is that it does have *some* biblical roots. (I emphasize "some" here, because, like all false teachings, it looks at and draws from some scriptures, while wholly ignoring a good many others.) The first two passages we read this morning from Deuteronomy and from Proverbs seem to support this view of the world and how it works. Here, once again, are a few of the verses we heard from Deuteronomy 28: "All these blessings will come upon you if you obey the Lord. You will be blessed in the city and in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, as will the crops of your land... The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated. The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to."

The 12th Proverb picks up on this idea of good people being blessed in this life: "Good people obtain favor from the Lord, but He condemns those who devise wicked schemes. No one can be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted... The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm."

This very clear-cut, very black and white understanding of how the world works is very appealing to many of us. We inherently like the idea of good people benefitting and being spared suffering – both now and in the hereafter - while the wicked will get what's coming to them both in this life and the next. This heresy or distortion of Christianity has a name, by the way, though most of us will never have heard it before. It's called "Moral Therapeutic Deism," a phrase coined by a sociology professor at Notre Dame by the name of Christian Smith. We call it "MTD" for short, but the full name is revealing when you break it down. This heresy is moral in nature, because it divides the world into good and evil, and it rewards the good and punishes the evil. The word "therapeutic" is instructive too, for it is therapeutic for us – it feels good to believe that good people are rewarded and the wicked get what's coming to them, both in this life and the next. It does our hearts and minds a certain measure of good to believe in a world God set up

and manages in that way. Deism, of course, means a belief in a supreme being, a creator who set the world up in a certain way and does not intervene in it supernaturally. So MTD doesn't so much credit God for intervening to bless the good and punish the wicked on a case by case basis, but rather believes in a God who set the world up to always work this way, according to these principles.

The problem with Moral Therapeutic Deism, of course, is that anyone who is actually paying attention to the world we live in – not to mention the biblical world – sees quite clearly it certainly does NOT work this way! Good people suffer all the time! Wicked and immoral people constantly get rewarded, elevated, become rich and famous – sometimes even elected President! And when we turn to the world of the bible – the *whole* bible, not just a few select sections or verses – MTD is refuted at every turn.

Let's start with a little Bible quiz: Can anyone name me a single character in the Bible who does not suffer...? Abraham... Isaac...Rebecca...Moses... David... Job... Ruth... Jesus... JESUS! Ever hear of him? He seemed to live a pretty good, moral life to me. The dude suffered, right? His life and ministry were not at all blessed with smooth sailing, success, and prosperity. Here's how writer Michael Coren put it in a recent *Christianity Today* article entitled "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People:"

The Bible itself actually makes it quite clear that faith in Jesus Christ does not guarantee a good life... Indeed, there is more prediction in Scripture of a struggle on earth for the believer than there is of gain and success. There may be Christian sects that promise material wealth and all sorts of triumphs in exchange for faith, but this is a non-Christian, even an anti-Christian, bargain, and has never been something that orthodox Christianity would affirm.

To quote Jesus, the one we call Lord, "In this world you will have trouble." (John 16:33) Notice that Jesus doesn't say that you *might* have trouble or that *some* of you will have trouble. He pretty much guarantees it. A chapter before in John 15 he says, "When the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...Servants are not greater than their master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also..." By the way, does anyone know what wound up happening to at least 10 of the disciples...? They were all killed – beheaded, crucified, that sort of thing.

Moral Therapeutic Deism could not be further from the truth that Jesus both lived and taught. And it is equally far from the truth of the world we live in and observe each and every day. There are some really good people in our church family who right now are suffering horribly. Look at our prayer list! Think of your own circle of family and friends! You and I both know people who at this very moment could be crying out those words from Psalm 22 that Jesus himself cried out from the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Here's the big problem with MTD, folks, and why we should be resisting it

at every turn. If the teaching and principles of Moral Therapeutic Deism seep into the heads and hearts of our suffering loved ones, what will they be tempted to conclude...? That they aren't good enough...that they're suffering because of their own wickedness...that they are somehow to blame for their cancer, that they're morally responsible. They are left to have suffering heaped upon their suffering in the form of this heresy that if they had lived a better life, if they had been closer to Jesus, they wouldn't be suffering right now.

Think of the poor and the hungry, struggling with day to day survival in ways none of us can even imagine – AND, on top of that, thanks to the teachings of Moral Therapeutic Deism – disguised as Christianity – they get to also blame themselves for not being morally good enough to be wealthy and self-sufficient.

And so, as I said with Ad-Hominem attacks two weeks ago, and as I said with our various stairways to heaven and towers of Babel last week, this week I am calling for all followers of Jesus to give up any attachment – even if it's at the sub-conscious level - to Moral Therapeutic Deism. And I'm asking that we give that up not just for Lent...but for Life.

The world that Yahweh created and that Jesus himself lived in does NOT reward the morally good and punish the morally wicked. The world that Yahweh created and that Jesus lived in does not spare the good people from suffering. There's not a single character in the Bible – including Jesus – who didn't suffer. Jesus himself promised us, in fact, that in this world we will have trouble.

So, where is the good news in all this, you may wonder? Well, for starters, it's in the fact that we are *not* abandoned in our times of darkness and hardship. We worship a God who does not look down on us from afar as we suffer, but who enters into our suffering with us, right alongside us, through the very thick of it. As the writer of Hebrews puts it in chapter 4 verse 15, “In Jesus we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses and struggles, but one who in every regard has suffered as we have...”

Where is the good news in all this? Well, for those of us who have a loving church family like this one – the good news is that we have brothers and sisters close at hand who *will* visit us when we are sick, who *will* feed us when we are hungry and unable to prepare meals for ourselves, and who *will* encourage us when we are despairing. I see this very thing happening every single week in this church. Ask the Robinson's! Ask the Bowen's! Ask Julie Biddick! Ask any of the people in this church who have suffered tremendous hardship what the people of this congregation have been like during such dark and difficult times.

Where is the good news in our repudiation of Moral Therapeutic Deism? I spoke to one of you quite recently whose closest relative is going through horrific cancer treatments and all its nasty side effects. And this is what she told me. “A big part of me wishes that none of this ever would have happened...But I also have to

say that the level of closeness, love, and connection we are sharing as we go through this together can only be described as beautiful and a blessing. I never would have wanted this for him or for me. But what it has brought us is everything Jesus talks about and why are granted the privilege of entering one another's suffering. It is so powerful and teaches us lessons nothing else could ever reveal. Yes, I am actually grateful for this journey..."

Folks, Jesus said it plainly... "In this world, you WILL have suffering... trouble...hardship..." But what you *do* with it...whom you go through it with... How you allow your church family and others to surround you...and what the ever-present suffering God will reveal to you about the true nature of life, beauty, and love may be the very best news you could ever experience this side of heaven.

No, the God we worship in Jesus Christ did NOT set up the world in a way where good, kind, moral people will be spared suffering and hardship. She set it up, instead, in the hope that *through* suffering and *through* the sharing of the entirety of the human experience, that we all may be one. This was Jesus's final prayer toward the end of the Gospel of John: "Father, my prayer is that they all may be one...I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world may know that you sent me and have loved *them* even as you have loved me." Amen.