

What Good Is Religion? Why Christianity is Immoral (and Why That's Good)

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People feel passionately about religion. Atheists have accused it of being everything that's morally wrong with humanity, while religious people claim that we can't have morality without religion.

Is religion good? Does it cause us to be better people? Or is it the cause of wars, destruction and violence?

As a Christian theologian and pastor, I have passionate feelings about my religion. But you may be surprised why I feel so passionately about Christianity.

Christianity is incredibly important because *Christianity makes us immoral.*

And that is a very good thing.

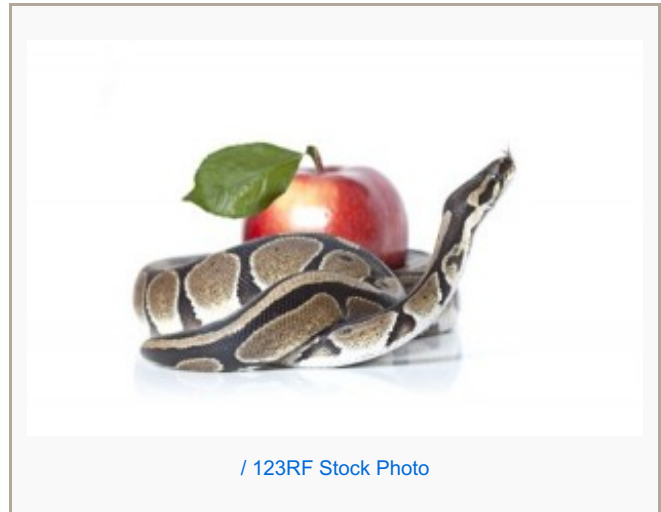
The Immorality of Christianity

Jesus was immoral. He even admitted it when he [claimed](#), “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Jesus did what immoral people do; he hung out with immoral people. You know, *those* people your mom warned you about. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He was [counted among the lawless](#). In a totally weird statement that has baffled theologians since the first century, Paul [wrote](#) that Jesus was made “to be sin.”

That's weird stuff and I'm not entirely sure what to make of it. But what I do know is this: Jesus calls his followers to be immoral in the eyes of the world. Yup. If you follow Jesus, people will start thinking that you are immoral. Why? Because Jesus calls us to transgress the religious, political, economic, and social barriers that separate people into the categories of “good” and “bad.” When you do this, you will stand with the social outcasts. You will love them. And when you do, society will label you as an immoral social outcast, too.

That's why being morally good is not the point of Christianity. When we try to be morally good, it's always in opposition to someone else who is morally bad. When we fall into moral categories by defining ourselves as good over and against others who are bad, we have fallen from the way of Jesus.

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” some highly moral people [asked](#) the disciples. But Jesus overheard the conversation and answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire steadfast love not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”



Jesus' questioners were sick with pride. They prided themselves on their high sense of goodness and holiness, but their sense of morality came at the expense of their scapegoats. Their sense of goodness was dependent upon having another group to sacrifice to the gods of morality.

Jesus Saves Us from Morality

But Jesus calls us to steadfast love. Jesus came to save us from our morals that define us as good over and against our evil scapegoats. Jesus was made "to be sin" so that we would no longer use the religious concept of sin as a justification to scapegoat others.

Paul wrote that "where sin increased, grace increased all the more." That is not a license to sin, but it is a sign of hope. God's grace meets us where we are and as we are. We do not have to be good people to receive God's grace. In fact, if our goodness is defined in opposition to others whom we claim are bad, our hearts will be hardened and we'll have trouble receiving God's grace.

Relaxing into God's Love

I have a good friend who is very moral and very religious. One day his heart broke down under the weight of his morality. He couldn't keep up. He cried in front of me as he described his efforts of trying to be good enough for his father, his wife, his in-laws, his children, and his God. His body and emotions were racked with tension. As we talked, he began to realize that he didn't have to live this way; indeed, that he couldn't live this way any longer. A life-time of pressure to be good enough poured through his tears. He began to let go of the task-master gods of morality and began to embrace the God who graciously offers unconditional and unmerited Love.

Near the end of our conversation, I told him what the theologian [James Alison](#) told me about the [Christian faith](#), "I hope you will be able to relax into the realization that being good or bad is not what it's about. It's about being loved."

So, what good is religion? Well, the Christian religion is good when it deemphasizes morality. It is good when it leads us to relax into God's love. My spirit shifted when I first heard that. And something shifted inside of my friend when I said those words to him. I used to think faith was about being good enough to earn it because we live in a culture that's based on earning love by doing the right things and performing at higher standards.

But that's not how it is with God. God's love is not based on anything we do; it's based on who God is. And God is love. Pure love with no strings attached. We cannot earn God's love by behaving properly because God's love is freely given to all people, even the "bad" ones. Even us.

Christianity is a good thing for the world when we imitate God's love. When we freely receive that love and freely offer it to everyone we meet.